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THE ETHICAL SLUT:  
A CRITIQUE OF THE REAPPROPRIATION OF OBSCENE  
LANGUAGE

Master Thesis

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Tartu

2016

I hereby declare that I have written the Master Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and data from other resources have been referred to.

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## Table of contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Polyamory, obscenity and obscene language .....	8
1.1. The concept of polyamory and related linguistic issues.....	8
1.2. Self-help books' genre and <i>The Ethical Slut</i> .....	11
1.2.1. The Ethical Slut. A Practical Guide to Polyamory, open Relationships & other Adventures .....	14
1.3. Overview of particular studies on obscene language.....	17
1.3.1. On the notion of the <i>obscene</i> , <i>profane</i> and <i>taboo</i> .....	20
1.3.2. Obscene language and taboo.....	23
1.3.3. Taboo language and strategies of substitution and avoidance .....	24
1.4. On the process of reappropriation .....	24
2. Methodology and the construction of the model of reappropriation.....	27
2.1. Lotman's model of the semiosphere .....	27
2.2. On notions of fear and shame in culture.....	30
3. <i>The Ethical Slut</i> .....	33
3.1. Dominant obscene words and their dynamics .....	33
3.1.1. <i>Slut</i> .....	36
3.1.2. <i>Fuck</i> .....	36
3.1.3. <i>Cock</i> and <i>cunt</i> .....	37
3.2. <i>Welcome</i> – the enlightening function and the dominant functions of <i>slut</i> .....	37
3.3. <i>The Practice of Sluthood</i> – performative function .....	42
3.4. <i>Navigating challenges</i> – function of normalization .....	46
3.5. <i>Sluts in love</i> – function of normalization.....	49
3.6. <i>A Slut Utopia</i> – imaginative function .....	52
3.7. Fear and shame in <i>The Ethical Slut</i> .....	53
4. Proposed model of reappropriation of obscene language .....	56
Conclusion.....	60
References .....	62
Kokkuvõte .....	67

## Introduction

The object of the current study is the self-help book titled *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures* (2009). It was first published in 1997 in the United States under the title *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* as a result of the collaboration of two authors. Dossie Easton, a psychotherapist and author who has lived and worked in sexual minority cultures since 1969, is dedicated primarily to feminist, polyamorous, BDSM<sup>1</sup>, spiritual, gender-diverse and LGBTQ communities. Easton offers her goal as follows: „I am committed to offering authentic, respectful, competent, and compassionate psychotherapy and relationship counselling to people exploring non-traditional lifestyles“ (Easton n.d.).<sup>2</sup> Janet Hardy is a writer and sex educator, also founder of the publishing house Greenery Press which specializes in books on BDSM and polyamory mostly focusing on non-fiction; she often collaborates with Dossie Easton.

The second edition chosen as the object of analysis was published in 2009. It includes additional information regarding polyamory<sup>3</sup> communities on the Internet. We selected the 2009 edition for practical reasons; namely, the availability of the first edition was present only in fragments in PDF format, which means we would be lacking parts of the material for analysis. More importantly - due to the twelve - year gap in between the first and the second edition - the last one was modified and expanded. This revision resulted in an improvement of the content analyzed.

The guiding principle of the book lies in the notion of obscene language reappropriation; specifically, the authors aim to reclaim pejorative terms such as *slut* and *fuck* and provide them with new and primarily positive connotations. That said, we want to point out that the authors use the term *slut* as encompassing any gender, i.e. as not exclusive to women. Bearing

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<sup>1</sup> Sexual practices which involve the usage of bondage and roleplaying including dominance and submission, sadomasochism and other types of acts. Often questioned due to the inclusion of behaviour perceived as risky, as well as one not „fitting“ into the commonly accepted model of a romantic relationship, BDSM more often than not actually consists of a higher degree of trust and successful dialogue between partners, precisely due to the lower degree of inhibition.

<sup>2</sup> More details regarding Easton's life and work can be found on the following website: <http://www.dossieeaston.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Polyamory is defined as „a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously“ (Haritaworn et al. 2006: 515).

in mind that the word *slut* carries a strong sexual connotation referring to a promiscuous woman, it is relevant to highlight the authors' definition of it:

So who is an ethical slut? We are. Many, many others are. Maybe you are too. If you dream of freedom if you dream of intimacy both hot and profound, if you dream of an abundance of friends and flirtation and affection, or following your desires and seeing where they take you, you've already taken the first step (Easton, Hardy 2009: 3).

*Ethical* and *slut* are the keywords present throughout the book as a whole, as well as the ones drawing our attention to the title. In the Oxford Dictionary they are defined as:

- slut – *noun (dissapproving, offensive)* 1. a woman who has many sexual partners; 2. a woman who is very untidy or lazy (Hornby 2000: 1216)
- ethical - connected with beliefs and principles about what is right and wrong; morally correct or acceptable (Hornby 2000: 427)

The disparity between the two is obvious and it uncovers a relation highly important to us. The first is that of the monogamous discourse, which we consider as central, normative, and reflected in the term *ethical*. The second is the polyamorous one as peripheral and the *Other*, reflected in the term *slut*. The unification of the words *ethical* and *slut* points towards the tension between the two from the outset. In addition to reappropriating the already mentioned words *slut* and *fuck*, the authors aspire to do the same with the words *cunt* and *cock*.

In order to elucidate and analyze this process we choose Juri Lotman's model of the semiosphere, thought of as „a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space. Only within such a space is it possible for the communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realised“ (Lotman 2005: 207). The reason for relying on Lotman's model is its applicability in multiple approaches in cultural and semiotic analysis, and the opportunity to observe more closely the various manifestations of culture and illustrate them accordingly.

The aim of the research is to outline the process of reappropriation of obscene language and develop a suitable model of it.

In order to do so, first we focus on the relation between the central (monogamous) and peripheral (polyamorous) discourse, and then we look at the functions of obscene language. In addition to the notions of center (i.e. monogamous discourse) and periphery (polyamorous discourse), it is important to include the concepts of fear and shame as regulators of behavior

in culture, as Lotman depicts in his article *О семиотике понятий «стыд» и «страх» в механизме культуры* (*About Semiotic Concepts of 'Shame' and 'Fear' in the Mechanism of Culture* 2002). The relation between obscene language and fear and shame as regulators of behavior in culture may prove as relevant for establishing a model of reappropriation.

The importance of the present study consists of two fundamental and intertwined perspectives.

First of all, the authors of *The Ethical Slut* attempt to seek out acknowledgement of the peripheral, polyamorous minority from the side of the monogamous majority. Second of all, this is attempted by using peripheral, obscene notions as a tool and modifying their meaning. The common denominator of both is the (re)establishment of power relations by means of language as a tool.

In the analysis we will seek out functions of obscene language while relying on textual analysis, and depict whether these functions succeed in constituting a potentially functioning model of reappropriation, and if so how this is accomplished. Moreover, it will be discussed whether the model of reappropriation could be applied to specific types of texts. Accordingly, our main research questions are:

1. What are the functions of obscene language in *The Ethical Slut*?
2. Do the extracted functions constitute a model of reappropriation and how?

The study consists of four chapters. The first chapter contains five sections and outlines the perspectives and theoretical background of the work. The first section regarding polyamory and related linguistic implications includes a concise background about polyamory, arising issues and examples of how people within polyamorous communities form new linguistic expressions in order to verbally state their feelings and doubts. The second section provides a basic overview of self-help books' genre and its discourse.

Accordingly, the final unit of the second section presents an overview of *The Ethical Slut*.

The third section directs attention towards the notion of the obscene. We will focus on the distinction between the profane and obscene, whilst introducing the notion of taboo as a common denominator. After this, we provide an overview of the historiography of research regarding obscene language in semiotics and related disciplines.

The fifth section will re-introduce to the reader the notion of taboo and the examples of its potential functions in the context of obscene language. Namely, we will clarify multiple types

of verbal taboo practices and the methods for concealing, avoiding and/or substituting forbidden notions and phrases.

Finally, the process of reappropriation finds its place in the last section of this chapter. It is necessary to define appropriation, which means "to take possession of or make use of exclusively for oneself" (Galinsky et al. 2003: 222). Reappropriation is thus considered as the process of reclaiming something, i.e. to reappropriate as „to take possession for oneself that which was once possessed by another“ (Ibid.).

The second chapter is theoretical. It includes an overview of the model of the semiosphere, followed by Yuri Lotman's perspective on fear and shame and their role in culture, and in the constitution of our model of reappropriation.

In the third chapter dedicated to the analysis, our main focus will be on the dominant obscene words and their usage, arising functions along with their explanations and implications. The obscene words in question are *slut*, *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt*. Since the word *slut* is the most frequent one, we extracted three sub-functions the word exhibited: correlational, descriptive and autobiographical. These three sub-functions are located within one dominant function that encompasses them, the enlightening function. In the following chapters of *The Ethical Slut*, the other three dominant functions of obscene language are: the performative function, function of normalization and the imaginative function.

The chapter will be concluded with a sub-section on fear and shame in *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures*.

The fourth chapter proposes a model of reappropriation and examines its applicability. It further suggests questions and the potential for future research.

The corpus of analysis is *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures*. The book consists of four chapters and a conclusion: *Welcome*, *The Practice of Sluthood*, *Navigating Challenges*, *Sluts in Love*, and the concluding section *A Slut Utopia*.

# 1. Polyamory, obscenity and obscene language

This chapter clarifies the concept of polyamory and the linguistic difficulties arising among polyamorous people. The implications of the absence of a language of a certain group are vast and they uncover nuances of established power relations in a given culture. Using non-normative language as an instrument of recognition is an intriguing undertaking and surely deserves more attention. The following theoretical background regarding obscenity and obscene language will provide a solid insight into the current study.

## 1.1. The concept of polyamory and related linguistic issues

Polyamory - Poly – from Greek *poly*, meaning „many, much, multi-, one or more“; Amor, amorous – from Late Latin *amorosum*, from *amor* „love“, from *amare* „to love“ (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016), is defined as „a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously“ (Haritaworn et al. 2006: 515). Although this is often used as a common definition, it is a rather narrow interpretation of the concept. This is so because the term polyamory implies a dominant focus on sexuality as the fundamental expression of one's affection as well as the view of being an inherent pillar of a given relationship.

Surely we would be advocating for quite a reductive view if we would hold on to the definition outlined above without considering an alternative. Thus, before proceeding to a more in-depth overview of polyamory and implications arising from it, we offer our own definition of the term. We define polyamory as a relationship between more than two adult persons; whether this relationship is purely physical, i.e. sexual, emotional or both, depends solely on people engaged in it and should be built on mutual respect, trust and openness, as any other nuance of relationships that surround us. On the other hand, monogamy is the practice of being romantically and/or sexually involved with (either married or not) one partner.

Polyamory, often referred to as *intentional non-monogamy*, came to prominence in the 1990s in the USA, but it has been developing since the 1900s (Noël 2006: 602). The



correlation of polyamory with the three feminist waves and the sexual revolution is more than tangible:

First-wave feminists, socialists and utopian societies explored intentional non-monogamous relationships and communities while also promoting birth-control methods to allow for greater control of sexuality and reproduction. In the 1960s, the sexual revolution and a variety of rights-based social movements further expanded understandings of gender, sexuality, race and (dis)ability. In the 1990s, polyamory emerged from this cultural context of social movements as a relationship structure where a person may choose to love and be sexual with more than one person at a time – and communicate openly about these choices (Noël 2006: 602-603).

Furthermore, this citation is of high relevance in order to be able to grasp various cultural and social implications of polyamory. It shows us that polyamory has emerged from the „confluence of a number of sexually emancipatory discourses; it tries to provide languages and ethical guidelines for alternative lifestyles and sexual and intimate relationships beyond the culture of compulsory monogamy“ (Haritaworn et al. 2006: 518).

In a world where monogamy is the dominant relationship form and where often even friendship is put in the second place, it is challenging to create an emancipatory and open space for polyamorous people. Some of the strongest tools supporting monogamy can be found among distinctive media platforms which developed during past decades. Incidentally, they also served as an opportunity for polyamory to enter the public media space. With the proliferation of online forums, social networks and poly websites, the term *polyamory* came into popular usage (Anapol in: Barker 2004: 75). However, the term itself originated in the 1960s to refer to the type of responsible non-monogamy advocated in Robert Heinlein's (1961) novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Barker 2004: 75).

There are, of course, multiple issues arising from the practice of polyamory in a strictly defined monogamous, heteronormative context. The most common ones encompass the omnipresent space of power struggle between the centre and periphery, gender implications, identity and sexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, language is often taken for granted to the extent that the role it has in culture and society is rarely questioned and discussed outside of academic circles. However, when speaking about polyamory we are confronted with a persistent difficulty relating to the

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<sup>4</sup> More insight into the mentioned, especially regarding the evolution of monogamy, can be found in the *Ancient Society* (1877), a seminal work by Lewis H. Morgan, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) by Friedrich Engels, as well as *The History of Human Marriage* (1891) by Edward Westermarck. The proliferation of the idea of soulmates and romantic love, which gave further incentive for monogamy from the 1920s onward, is best analysed in the context of consumer culture that has been rapidly and continuously developing from the same period. Useful readings can be found in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991) by Mike Featherstone, and *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (1986) edited by Arjun Appadurai.

fact that the members of a polyamorous community do not possess a language which describes and manifests their emotions, experiences, needs and rights. Ritchie and Barker's article from 2006 under the title *There aren't words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up': Constructing polyamorous languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy* provides an overview of this problem.

The authors pointed out the constraint of polyamory from the dominant monogamous discourse used to communicate language related to partnership, love and infidelity, among others. Surely we are able to notice this only by glancing over the prevalent newspapers and magazines, social media, and paying attention to the actual communication among two monogamous, heteronormative partners. Using material in the form of discussions online, websites and self-help books, the authors sought to analyze „the ways in which members of polyamorous communities construct their identities through language“ (Ritchie, Barker 2006: 1).

Some issues, such as those including jealousy in relationships, set an example for the previously mentioned constraint of polyamory due to the common misconception according to which this emotion is reserved for monogamous couples and is a manifestation of affection and caring. What the authors bring forward in their article are the examples of made-up words which polyamorous people use<sup>5</sup> in order to avoid the negatively loaded connotative value of a specific term.

Her childhood nanny termed her jealousy 'just jea', and Fredman describes the reassuring connotations of 'just jea' as linked to notions of 'this will pass' and thus manageable: changing the word in this way allowed her to change her experience of the emotion (Fredman in: Ritchie, Barker 2006: 14).

Other examples of re-writing the language of jealousy include 'wibble' or 'wibbly' for the purpose of describing insecurity regarding partner's other relationships (Ibid. 14). Moreover, the term 'frubbly' is also introduced. It refers to the state of compersion, i.e. a state when a partner feels happy about their partner enjoying another relationship.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the authors' findings online.

<sup>6</sup> *Compersion* can be thought of as opposite to jealousy, making its primary characteristic the positive emotional reaction to a lover's other relationship. It was coined by Kerista Comune, an experiment in polyamorous living in San Francisco founded in 1971 and broke up in 1991. Their main idea included group marriage, shared economic resources, and intentional community. In addition to *compersion*, another term coined by them and used widely, is that of *polyfidelity* (Veaux 2014). Additional information, including an online glossary of polyamorous terms, can be found on the following website:  
<https://www.morethantwo.com/polyglossary.html#keristac>

A short section of the article is dedicated to self-help books about polyamory and its practices. This allows us to open the following sub-chapter while briefly outlining the main features of the genre while focusing on *The Ethical Slut* as the material for analysis.

## 1.2. Self-help books' genre and *The Ethical Slut*

Let us start with drawing attention to the notion of self-help. The term itself is very broad<sup>7</sup>, and since it is not the focal point of our thesis, we will continue with a short overview of the genre and its relation to *The Ethical Slut*.

It can be claimed that the cradle of self-help culture as we know it today is found in America; beginning with Benjamin Franklin's contribution and continuing its development nowadays, it has been inextricably bound to the notion of the American Dream<sup>8</sup> and the pursuit of happiness (Effing 2009: 125). Whether we speak about personal success, health, fitness, inner peace or similar notions found within the self-help genre, achieving happiness perpetually presents itself as the dominant element. It is widely accepted that the self-help literature initiated in the eighteenth century followed by the publication of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (Butler-Bowdon, in: Effing 2009: 128).

Franklin's *Autobiography* announced the emergence of a view of man as good and capable of becoming better. He took the puritan characteristic of self-scrutiny to its highest degree by contriving a method in which he set up his own chart of virtues, and methodically tried to acquire them one after another until they became a habit (Ibid.).

The self-help genre was a product of multiple influences and trends within the American society, especially since the end of 19th century onward. Thus, we may distinguish particular

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<sup>7</sup> „The term 'self-help' has numerous descriptive uses – in law, psychology, business, education or technology, for example – and, at the same time, numerous strong connotations. [...] In fact, when we talk about self help, the range of reference is so broad that it is almost without any clear semantic core“ (Effing 2011: 20).

<sup>8</sup> In order to successfully clarify the notion of the American Dream, we have to keep in mind the role religion played in its advancement. Specifically, the dominant religious tradition in the United States was Protestant Christianity. „A strong puritan tradition, with its emphasis on hard work, education, the need for self examination, discipline and frugality was the soil upon which the beginning of the nation was built“ (Effing 2009: 127). Even nowadays we can observe various nuances directing us towards the idea of the American Dream, be it in movies, tv shows or distinctive media platforms. There is one thing inherent to any type of representations – the one positioning the individual as *having his/her life in his/her own hands*, and *being in charge of ones destiny*. The latter overwhelmingly reminds us of the ideology of neoliberalism where, on the one hand, we are witnessing a period which locates the individual in the center of attention, providing him/her with an omnipresent illusion of choice. „The neoliberal state establishes and protects the interests of capital at the expense of reducing social transfers and basic rights of the workers, also promoting the logic according to which the individual is responsible for the realization of their social, health and other rights, regardless of his or her realistic financial opportunities“ ((Hromadzić 2008: 42).

characteristics; the puritan view valuing wealth and work was further effected with the so-called „mind-power“ discourse which „replaced a self-discipline work ethic with a vision of natural ease and prosperity, making way for a consumer culture focused on fantasies of boundless abundance“ (Effing 2009: 130).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, any economical and social instability would result with the proliferation of self-help books, which through time appropriated various terms from psychology, applying them into their work and positioning themselves as a friend of the reader. This is highly visible when picking up any example of the genre, where we see the authors' approach as light, friendly and easy to follow, all for the purpose of being available to, and suitable for people of any level of education.

Thus we encounter a category of the self-help genre more or less compatible with the book *The Ethical Slut* which we will be analyzing. It is the one that has at its focus the ideas of inner peace and self-fulfillment which are attained primarily by means of an active individual who takes matters in his/her own hands and doesn't depend on anyone or anything. At the same time their attitude towards life and experiences is positioned as crucial for initiating any change. We find this type of discourse highly problematic<sup>10</sup> due to at least few reasons: it builds itself on notions of individuality and unique approach, falsely offering solutions generic in nature while failing to acknowledge the importance of the role of the reception of the reader. Moreover, positioning the reader as the one fully responsible for the outcomes of the guidelines followed creates a risky space for their well-being, provided they feel as if they failed to accomplish any progress or change (the potential of which, we would argue, relies heavily on placebo effect). Contrary to popular opinion and main premise of the self-help books' genre according to which the reader's engagement with the material is crucial for its realizing potential, this is rarely the case. Namely, the notion itself „doesn't correspond to the state of affairs in the dynamics of self-help. By reading self-help books, a person doesn't help him/herself, but the author of the book is the one helping the reader“ (Žurić-Jakovina 2013: 41).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Newer trends observable during the last decades witness a turn to certain Eastern traditions, such as yoga and meditation, which noticeably popularized various approaches when it came to incorporating spirituality into the genre on a higher level (Effing 2011: 136). This directly relates to the New Age movement advancing in the West (predominantly the US) in the 1970s, with features encompassing „the belief in an evolutionary cultural transformation of society, a preference for eclecticism, an emphasis on individualism, the adaptation of Eastern religious beliefs such as religious monism, an emphasis on spirituality and mysticism and attempts to achieve harmony with nature“ (König 2000: 6).

<sup>10</sup> This doesn't pose a problem for the focus of our analysis because the self-help discourse is not crucial for our inquiry and isn't the focus of our analysis.

<sup>11</sup> „[...] ne odgovara stanju stvari u dinamici samopomoći. Čitajući knjige za samopomoć osoba ne pomaže sama sebi, već je autor taj koji pomaže čitatelju“ (Žurić-Jakovina 2013: 41). My translation from Croatian – K.D.

The notion of self-help shows newer tendencies of the genre to appropriate concrete aspects of cultural, social and political state of affairs. Furthermore, the authors often position themselves as modifiers and initiators of change within the existing normative structure, which is also the case in *The Ethical Slut*.

Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton's agenda is clear; using their own experience within polyamorous communities<sup>12</sup> (themselves making the „switch“ from monogamy at some point in their lives) as a basis, they offer readers a guide for leading a polyamorous lifestyle and informing themselves about it. Their position is clear while they are continuously questioning the heteronormative and mononormative lifestyles, viewing the latter as primarily compulsory and constraining to a high degree. Providing their personal experiences as examples throughout the book, we encounter autobiographical elements combined with guidelines for readers inside a narrative enveloped in the process of establishing balance of power by means of words.

There is one additional aspect of the book which we find as important to outline; the female authorial voice carries heavy implications when it is related to obscene language. Namely, the mere utterance of obscene language is often perceived differently depending on whether the addresser is male or female. If we were to raise further implications which would surely result in a different and vast topic, it would be enough to simply direct our attention to the notion of politeness and gender indexicality.

[...] the stereotypical view that women are more linguistically polite than men, evidenced in early research in Western cultural settings, should be interpreted as an ideological expectation, held in place by powerful gendered ideologies, which holds white middle-class behaviour for women as the most powerful, hegemonic discourse for *all* women to follow in Western societies. If women should stray beyond the boundaries of this expectation, then they may well be viewed as deviant and/or deficient, and negative evaluation may well result as a consequence of this behaviour (Mills, Mullany 2011: 73).

In this respect, Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton's agenda uncovers a twofold significance; they aim to reappropriate obscene language that is still perceived as belonging to the discourse of men.

If one's everyday reality predominantly belongs to the periphery, in order for him/her to actually be capable of intervening into the process of constructing their own happiness and accepting limitations, they should be able to express it.

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<sup>12</sup> *Polyamorous communities* is a term which describes a group of people with common beliefs and values regarding their romantic and/or sexual relationships who share experiences, wishes and wants. They may be in a relationship with each other and share a household, or live in a different type of arrangement. The term further encompasses polyamorous communities online. For example: <http://www.polyamoryonline.org/> and <http://www.polyamory.com/forum/>

If there exists an obstruction in doing so in the form of negation and refusal from the side of the normative/central sphere, we are left with at least two inquiries: what are the potential means for changing this and what would be the conditions suitable for initiating such a transition? Applying this to the implications of a polyamorous language which is, as we found in the chapter regarding polyamory and linguistic implications, virtually non-existent, we have to be careful. It is questionable to claim the nonexistence of any minority's language and it raises an issue of whether the existence comes into being when these kinds of languages are acknowledged by the center. If we follow Berger and Luckmann's claim according to which "everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen. An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life" (Berger, Luckmann 1967: 51-52), our answer would be affirmative.

### **1.2.1. The Ethical Slut. A Practical Guide to Polyamory, open Relationships & other Adventures**

The first edition of this book published in 1997 and titled *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* differs from the second one - published in 2009 - in a couple of instances. The second edition included additional content. A completely new segment -consisting of exercises aimed at the reader with the goal of helping him/her clarify certain information outlined in the book and to follow their progress in this respect – was added. Furthermore, also as a result of the authors' work in the period between the first and second edition, the material in general was slightly broadened. after the first edition was published. Thus, they included fragments of various experiences from their own lives and problems attended to in therapy sessions.

Also the titles of the two editions are different. *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* determines its centre of attention almost immediately if we focus on the second part of the title. First of all, it is not explicit that the genre is actually self-help before a potential reader consults the content, and this is more of an exception than it is a rule.<sup>13</sup> The notion of a *guide* functions as a hint towards self-help, but it also implies a set of theoretical and/or practical advice and/or instructions. We view them as reconstructive and educational, whereas self-help *per se* predominantly relies on personal development and on solving particular problems in the life of the reader while offering mostly what appear as quick

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of other, more direct self-help titles include: *The Secret*, *The 7 habits of Highly Effective People*, *You can heal you life*.

solutions. The authors of *The Ethical Slut* established a balance between the self-help discourse and the one we call the *enlightening* one, due to the *enlightening* function heavily present throughout the first part of the book. Accordingly, the fragment described as *infinite sexual possibilities* leads us to the practical and creative aspects of sexuality and doesn't offer anything rich in isolation. However, when viewed as an extension of *the ethical slut*, we can decode the following: the ethical slut is an oxymoron by any measure of the standard English language. In this particular case the notion of *ethical* combines connotative values of honor, chastity and morality, while the notion of *slut* connotes deviant, promiscuous behaviour and values, in short - the *other*. Because of this proposed modification they may be perceived as reconstructive.

In the second edition we see a clear distinction between the titles: *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, open Relationships & other Adventures* contains a few supplements. It characterizes the guide as *practical* primarily due to the already mentioned inclusion in the form of exercises for readers. Clearly, this subtitle encloses an explanatory function. Although it may seem broad, the title of the second edition is quite narrow as a result of locating the guide inside practices of polyamory, open relationships and other adventures. This is so because the title and content are contradictory in this respect; the title might seem as intended for readers who *are* polyamorous and/or practice some form of the so-called non-traditional relationships. However, the authors are explicit on multiple occasions regarding the clarification of terms and obscene language to people practicing monogamy, which would seem to make the text as targeting the monogamous audience more than the polyamorous one. We find this interesting because it raises the question of elements balancing the narration itself between the monogamous, omnipresent discourse, and the polyamorous, peripheral one. As already pointed out in the introduction, the relation between the notions *ethical* (center) and *slut* (periphery) presents itself in the title and points towards the relevance of constructing an identity around the word *slut* while simultaneously reappropriating it along with other obscene words.

The book is divided into five parts:

1. *Welcome* (pp. 3-54);
2. *The Practice of Sluthood* (pp. 55-106);
3. *Navigating Challenges* (pp. 107-179);
4. *Sluts in Love* (pp. 181-267)
5. *A Slut Utopia* (pp. 268-271)

The first part encompasses a multiperspective outlook regarding the authors' personal view concerning the identity of a slut, implications of it in the public sphere, proposed potential of and its position in the center marginalized by means of obscene words they seek to reappropriate.

*The Practice of Sluthood* introduces the reader to various potential styles a slut can develop; *performance* is the keyword of this particular section, showing us the importance of reiteration when it comes to actually constituting an identity of a slut. In addition to depicting distinctive styles and skills relevant for the latter, the authors bring forth the question of having and raising children when sluthood is a chosen lifestyle. This opposes the monogamous and polyamorous discourse in the text, providing the basis for further development of the function of normalization, as we will see in the analysis.

The third part, *Navigating Challenges*, presents itself as a roadmap through various challenges polyamorous people go through. Interestingly, it predominantly remains in the realm of monogamous discourse which reminds us of one important issue concerning the question of how can a polyamorous person communicate certain difficulties/emotions if there is a lack of language to do so? Thus the prevailing issues tackled in this chapter, such as jealousy and compromise, are often described in relation to monogamy, weakening the potential for reappropriation.

*Sluts in Love* is an intriguing part directing our attention from the title towards the current status of particular words, especially when they are combined with others which are immersed in our everyday usage. Love is certainly one of them and its positioning beside the word *slut* is a subversive attempt made by the authors, yet finally short-term in the text. It gradually develops through the first three sections focusing on issues which the majority of people experience when/if trying to meet new people or remaining single, being in a couple, living together, and other similar aspects pertaining to the monogamous lifestyle. Afterwards, the authors forward the reader's attention towards sexual activities such as group sex and public sex, relationships with more partners etc. This creates an interesting discrepancy because it implicitly positions love as exclusive to monogamy and a sexually adventurous lifestyle as pertaining to polyamory, whereas it doesn't have to be so at all nor do the authors openly advocate for such a scenario. The contrast between these two parts is already shown in the title, once again uncovering the disparity between monogamy i.e. the center, and polyamory, i.e. the periphery.

In the final part, *A Slut Utopia*, the authors introduce a *slut manifesto*, outlining their dominant views and beliefs regarding sluthood and consequently positioning the realized and



unrealized world against one another. Furthermore, they accentuate this with notions such as *creation* and *wishing*.

### **1.3. Overview of particular studies on obscene language**

This section is an overview of previous studies on obscene language and its functions. Timothy Jay is a professor of psychology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and a psycholinguistics consultant. He studied taboo words while focusing on developing and exploring the acts of swearing. Swearing, taboo and obscene language are not one and the same; all of them are restricted in usage, the level depending on the cultural context. Swearing, however, is the verbal usage of offensive language, mostly initiated as a manifestation of strong emotions expressing anger, resentment and/or fear towards something/someone. While swearing consists of a verbal manifestation of obscenity, obscene language entails a broader perspective including verbal and written offensive content. Both swearing and obscene language have an inherent element in taboo.

Jay's primary research inquiry relates to the role of cursing in America, united with topics on language, education and censorship. Some of his well known work can be found under the titles *Why we Curse. A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech* (1999), as well as *Cursing in America* (1992). His article *The Utility and Ubiquity of Taboo Words* from 2009, is an overview which addressed issues of frequency of usage, correlation with types of behaviour encompassing the topic with a neuro-psycho-social framework and implications for further research..

Another paper that approaches swearing from a biopsychosocial perspective was published in 2013 under the same title. It included new insights on the matter, focusing on questions such as the contextual factors and their role in swearing, followed by neurological and psychosocial components of the same. The authors accentuate that the functions of swearing remain more or less unknown (Vingerhoets et al. 2013), proving as fruitful ground for inquiry.

Building up closer to a wider analysis including cultural and social significance and implications of swearing, we can single out a few papers dealing with swearing in the cinema, positive effects of obscenity on persuasion and the role of obscene language in foreign language acquisition.

*Swearing in the Cinema: An analysis of profanity in US teen-oriented movies, 1980-2006*, a study published in 2009 in the Journal of Children and Media, deals with „the types, frequency, and usage of profanity in movies directed at and featuring teenagers“ (Cressman et al. 2009). Authors' central premise is built around seeking out the potential relation between changes in types of profanity used inside the previously outlined periods. Interestingly, the obtained results showed a decrease of profanity used in newer teen-oriented movies as opposed to those from the 1980s. However, this may prove as fruitful ground for further research, one of which might include additional elements in the analysis such as through a cultural studies approach that would incorporate a more wider outlook including the cultural and social analysis of the context inside which these movies were produced (if we view them as mirroring existing social structures, dynamics of gender and power relations of a given period).

Finally, *Swearing: A 'Bad' Part of Language; A Good Part of Language Learning* (1995), by Robin-Eliece Mercury aims to show the advantages of taboo language and the role it has in the process of second language acquisition. She proposes that the inclusion of taboo language may benefit students due to its potential to explicate „what constitutes 'obscene' language in North American contexts, why native speakers choose to use it, and what it signifies sociolinguistically“ (Eliece-Mercury 1995: 28). In the context of our work, this is very useful due to the fact that our goal, in addition to establishing a model of reappropriation, is to offer how and if it can be used in particular texts for educational purposes.

It is also worth listing some examples of research and Ph.D thesis written on the topic of obscene language and reappropriation. Let us start with a doctoral thesis defended in 2014 titled *The Function of Russian Obscene Language in Late Soviet and post-Soviet Prose*. The author Manuela Kovalev leads us into an extensive analysis of Russian obscene language (i.e. Russian *mat*), providing works of literature as objects of analysis. In her inquiry she addresses aspects such as identity formation through obscene language, obscene language as civilised political protest, gender implications of its usage and its role and potential in maintaining social structures. Kovalev demonstrates „that the literary function of obscene language is strongly determined by its correlation with *literaturnyi iazyk* (standard Russian, i.e. the norm to be followed) and the ideology connected therewith“ (Kovalev 2014: 198), further revealing that „literary *mat* has always been an effective means of exposing and deconstructing socio-ideological norms, thereby also contributing to the establishment and maintenance of the same“ (Ibid. 199).

Another important contribution from the same year is *The Context of Censorship: A Look at Swearing, the Self, and the State* (2014) by Jameely Syed, in which she focused on the context of censorship and usage of taboo language in the United States.

As she clearly outlines, „attention will be paid to instances of censoring in order to establish the conventions that define the boundaries of bad language as it occurs in private versus public discourse“ (Syed 2014: 4). Essentially, the author concludes with offering a framework explaining the notion of „bad language“, followed with a cross-cultural analysis of taboo while establishing that „bad language is not inherently bad, but rather accumulates its negative connotations over the course of time, as in the case of the words *shit* and *cunt* (Ibid. 54).

A thesis from 2013 titled *Translate this, motherfucker! A contrastive study on the subtitling of taboo words* falls into the category of linguistic analysis. The author studies the translation of swearing and other taboo words, supplying as material 15 different movies and subtitles in English and Norwegian. The goal of the study was to extract and analyze, as well as try to explain, syntactic, semantic and functional discrepancies between taboo words in English and the translations in Norwegian subtitles (Lie 2013: 4).

If we are to bring ourselves closer to the heritage and contribution of Tartu-Moscow scholars in the field of obscene language, we may find many works attending to the topic of Russian obscene language (*русский мат*) in distinctive periods. For example, Yuri Levin, a Russian linguist, philologist and semiotician, dealt with various fields not only pertaining to the humanities but also natural sciences. Among many of his topics were those such as Russian metaphors, metonymies and poetry, while obscene language found its place in his work *Об obscene выражениях русского языка* (About obscene expressions in the Russian language, 1998). He discusses Russian obscene expressions while focusing on their semantic and communicative aspects and further identifies two main classes of obscene expressions: the first class is constituted by actual curses, i.e. strong language, and the second class contains substitutions of obscene language.

Other works on the topic may be acquired in the collection *Злая лая матерная* (Evil obscene bark 2005). It is possible to read a range of topics concerning obscene language, such as the one regarding the possibility and necessity of translating obscene words, by Silvi Salupere (*Неприличный перевод. О возможности и нужности перевода obscene лексики*) while using as an example the translation of Kurt Vonnegut's book *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) into the Estonian and Russian language.

The same collection contains discussions regarding the gender-specific aspects of Russian obscene language, its position in religious contexts as well as the semantic and communicative characteristics of taboo. Lastly, we may encounter Boris Uspenskij's selected works in *Язык и культура* (Language and Culture, 1994). Topics are various: from language and its location in the dichotomy *sacred-profane*, to the mythological aspect of Russian expressive phraseology, both of which pertain to the area of our interest.

### 1.3.1. On the notion of the *obscene*, *profane* and *taboo*

The focus of the authors of *The Ethical Slut* lies on obscene language, and because of this we think it is relevant to provide an overview of the notion of the *obscene*. Moreover, we will clarify the difference between the notions *obscene* and *profane*, as well as introduce the notion of *taboo* which is inherent to both of them. We think that the overview of these notions is necessary for our study because it serves as a theoretical base for the upcoming analysis.

When we think about vernacular speech, it often happens that we take various nuances of it for granted. This attitude is much more prevalent when we speak about particular aspects of vernacular speech, such as the obscene and profane encompassed with the notion of taboo. When we say „taking for granted“, we aim to forward the reader's attention to the multilayered nature of the everyday, sometimes even mundane practices. It is precisely in these micro spheres that we are able to find dominant symptoms and manifestations of a given culture. We will thus outline some of the main characteristics of the obscene, profane and taboo, as well as clarify the concepts before proceeding to the linguistic level of the three.

It is possible to define obscene as signifying „something that offends or outrages, because it defies accepted standards of decency, civility or modesty; it is connected to feelings of repulsion and disgust“ (Mey 2007: 5). This ranges through distinctive cultural and social patterns often manifesting dominant ideologies. Thus we can hear expressions such as „an obscene amount of money“ or an „obscene request“ which show us at least two things; the fluidity and dynamics of linguistic notions, as well as the role and power of metaphors to structure and manifest our everyday experiences.<sup>14</sup> Mey offers a concise overview of the term „obscene“ as follows:

The term 'obscene' has been linked to the Greek term *ob skene* ('off stage'), as violent acts in Greek theatre were committed away from the eyes of the audience: offstage, behind the scenes.

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<sup>14</sup> Work which deserves mention in this respect is certainly one of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by* (1980). Their agenda was to show and discuss the means by which we think and express our thoughts in language, proposing metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of mind.

Descending into the Latin *obscensus* in the sixteenth century, this sense was kept alive, coming to mean that something should be kept 'out of public view'. Then, it was mainly used in a legal context to describe expressions that deviate from prevalent norms especially of 'sexual morality'; and it was applied as a characteristic particularly when obscene representations were employed as a means to criticise religious and/or political authority, for instance, in the context of carnival and caricature. Only in 1857 did the term enter the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* (Mey 2007: 6).

Mey continues to illuminate the concept of obscene by bringing forward certain characteristics. Namely, it is necessary to accentuate the fact according to which nothing is obscene *per se*. As clearly pointed out, „like the aesthetic, the moral and the legal, the obscene essentially is a value judgement and a cultural category produced through processes of reification“ (Mey 2007: 7). Furthermore, the obscene has been subject to multiple influences, processes of categorization and taxonomic implications, particularly throughout the 20th century onward.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of *profane* needs to be distinguished from the notion of *obscene*. If we look into Merriam-Webster dictionary, the origin of *profane* is defined as *outside the temple, not sacred*; Latin – pro (before), fanum (temple) = profanus, followed by *profanare* = to desecrate, render unholy, violate (Merriam-Webster 2015). Notions of profane and sacred are inextricably linked since the former contains roots in religion and it supposes the existence of its opposite, i.e. the sacred. Accordingly, the *sacred* comes from Latin *sacrare* = to make sacred, consecrate; hold sacred (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016).

In his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995[1912]), Émile Durkheim draws a clear distinction between the two, viewing them as characteristic for any religious belief. According to him, the sacred designates a unifying principle constituting group interests materialized in symbols, myths, dogmas, totems etc., whereas the profane in the, mundane, material. In his attempt to draw distinctions between them, he emphasizes how *not* to observe them. Namely, we cannot view them as belonging to a hierarchy since the „subordination of one thing to another is not enough to make one sacred and the other not“ (Durkheim 1995: [1912]: 35). A second relevant aspect concerns not being able to equate the sacred and profane with the opposition of good and evil, the latter being „two opposed species of the same genus“ (Ibid.). On the other hand, the sacred and profane have primarily been conceived „as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common“ (Ibid.).

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<sup>15</sup> This is thoroughly discussed in Michel Foucault's unfinished work *The History of Sexuality* (1976). The first volume attends to the process of how sexuality entered public speech, as well as its categorization and its becoming increasingly regulated by means of public discourse in order to obtain and maintain power and control within society.

An element inherent to the notions of *obscene* and *profane* is the notion of *taboo*. It further illuminates the notions of *obscene* and *profane* because it indicates an invisible boundary in language and everyday behaviour; acts and/or notions considered as obscene and/or profane are always tabooed to a certain degree.

*Taboo* designates a ban or prohibition, whereas the word itself „comes from the Polynesian languages where it means a religious restriction, to break which would entail some automatic punishment“ (Douglas 1979: 72). Douglas further states that in the newer periods and following the English usage of the term, it is rarely connected with religion.

Taboo presents itself as a fundamental part of our daily interactions and behaviour, probably more than we are sometimes aware.<sup>16</sup> According to Allan and BurrIDGE, „any kind of behaviour can be tabooed. For behaviour to be prescribed, it must be perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or to his/her community; but the degree of harm can fall anywhere on a scale from a breach of etiquette to downright fatality“ (Allan, BurrIDGE 2006: 11). The quote also implies that we may often find ourselves in situations where we will involuntarily state and/or do something which will inevitably offend a particular person, simply because a specific act or word doesn't function as a taboo *for us*. This may often happen in multicultural environments where people from different parts of the world meet, where our attitude and behaviour is often predetermined after finding out the answer to the question „Where are you from?“.

Taboo thus finds its place on various levels of a given culture and is characterized by a fluid nature. Because of this, we cannot explicitly state that there exists an absolute taboo. „There is an endless list of behaviours 'tabboed' yet nonetheless practised at some time in (pre)history by people for whom they are presumably not taboo“ (Allan, BurrIDGE 2006: 9-10).

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that Mary Douglas's contribution is interesting to draw attention to due to the connection it has with the notion of taboo. In her work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (2002), where she discusses rituals of purity and impurity with the aim of showing how they create unity in experience. Thus she sees „nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance; it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function“ (Douglas 2002: 2). However, she points out that „some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order“ (Douglas 2002: 3). This is directly associated with Douglas's theory regarding the functions of pollution ideas within society. According to her, we can distinguish two functions: instrumental and expressive. The former refers to „people trying to influence one another's behaviour“ (Ibid.), whereas the latter is believed to refer to some pollutions that „are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order“ (Ibid.). The instrumental function can be regarded as one of the tools which has maintenance of social order as its purpose; anything falling outside of the sphere of prescribed cleanliness is considered as a deviation from the norm leading to specific repercussions. On the other hand, the expressive function is reflected in analogies such as „prostitute as social sewer“.

### 1.3.2. Obscene language and taboo

Obscene and profane language are both considered to be offensive and degrading, but they need to be differentiated in one important aspect: while the profane<sup>17</sup> predominantly refers to the usage of „religious terminology in a profane, secular or indifferent manner“ (Jay in Eliece-Mercury 1995: 30), „all obscene language is taboo language because these expressions are restricted in some way for their use in public“ (Eliece-Mercury 1995: 30).<sup>18</sup>

Throughout history, we are aware of the proximity and intertwinement of obscenity and sexual practices. Along with the changes and developments in cultures, modifications of attitudes and views are a continuous process often taking place in a subtle manner and resulting in an upheaval in the form of revolutions in thought, such as feminism and the sexual revolution in historical epochs. It is more than apparent that obscenity has had a solid, stable place as an indicator of non-accepted behavioral practices within a society. It is mostly evident if we take religious and artistic<sup>19</sup> customs as an example, since art in general serves as one of the fundamental sources of depicting and uncovering various elements considered as obscene, profane or simply located on the periphery of the everyday cultural and social structure.

Verbal taboo can be said to encompass a various number of linguistic categories and implications. Ranging from political, national and institutional, to racial and sexual, it is challenging to actually delimit it due to the dynamics of specific notions. The temporal factor is of relevance here since the fluidity of cultural and social practices varies and is modified through time. Hence what was deemed as taboo in a specific context some years ago, doesn't necessarily mean it will remain as such.

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<sup>17</sup> Origin: Latin – *pro* (before), *fanum* (temple) = *profanus*; outside the temple, not sacred; *profanare* – to desecrate, render unholy, violate (Online Etymology Dictionary 2015).

<sup>18</sup> We can also distinguish *cursing*, *blasphemy*, *vulgarisms* and *expletives* as some of the most common in American English. Cursing is characterized by the act of targeting, namely when a speaker aims at a specific individual, group or thing and wishes them harm; because of this, *verbal assault* is often how it is described in slightly official terms (Eliece-Mercury 1995: 30). Blasphemy is defined as the „deliberate use of religious terminology to denigrate God, religious icons, and religious institutions“, whereas vulgarisms encompasses crude and raw use of language, „used to debase or devalue the thing or individual referred to or described“ (Ibid.). Lastly, expletives are interjections which are emotionally charged, while not addressing anyone specifically, „speakers use expletives to release their frustrations and vent their emotions“ (Ibid.).

<sup>19</sup> One of the works which can provide a solid and detailed overview of the obscenity in, and of art, is found in the book *Art and Obscenity* (2007) by Kerstin Mey in which she discusses obscenity in art throughout history, concluding with an overview into the current aspect within the digitalized era and cyberspace. The latter is of particular interest since it raises some relevant questions related to the fact according to which we live in a time where almost any type of content is available to us at any time, anywhere.

### 1.3.3. Taboo language and strategies of substitution and avoidance

This section points out the linguistic processes of substitution and avoidance. We think it is important to include it because it provides common examples of various modes which people use to cope with verbal taboo.

The designation 'verbal taboo' has tended to be used mainly with reference to practices in which suppression and replacement of forms is extensive, highly systematized with reference to definable contexts occurrence and accompanied by heightened consciousness and objectification, including labeling or typification, of the practices involved on the part of members of the speech community (Merlan, 2006: 462-463).

We can speak of three strategies related to obscene language usage and other types of verbal taboo, which can be found in the work titled *Forbidden Words. Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (2006) by the authors Keith Allan and Kate Burridge. The authors distinguish euphemisms, dysphemisms and orthophemisms. They define them as X-phemisms, simply for the purpose of encompassing these strategies.

Euphemisms are defined as favourable alternatives for ones which would possibly offend someone, or as simply not suitable in a given situation where a more *polite* expression is preferable. Examples may include saying *passed away* or *departed* instead of *died*, or *adult entertainment* instead of *pornography*. Euphemisms are the most frequently used X-phemisms.

The term dysphemism, on the other hand, is best understood as the opposite of euphemism; thus it can be defined as involving „the verbal resources for being offensive, being abusive, or just plain letting off steam. Like euphemism, it is motivated by fear and distaste, but also by hatred and contempt“ (Burridge 2006: 457). An example could be „croak“ for stating someone's death.

Orthophemisms are located in a neutral area between euphemisms and dysphemisms; because of their mildness, orthophemisms will also be the preferred option in addition to euphemisms. As probably assumed, the example for an orthophemism would be the word *die*.

## 1.4. On the process of reappropriation

It is necessary to clarify the notion of appropriation from the outset. The term itself is quite broadly conceived and in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* we encounter two definitions of the verb *appropriate*. The first definition offers an explanation of it as „to take



exclusive possession of“, whereas the second seems more specific: „to take or make use of without authority or right“ (Merriam-Webster 2015.).<sup>20</sup> Both definitions share the verb „take“ which, in combination with „use of without authority or right“ reminds us of theft. Put in more accurate terms, „these meanings parallel the use of the term in legal contexts, strengthening the connotation of an unfair or unauthorized taking“ (Rogers 2006: 475).

In semiotic terms, appropriation is defined as „the transformation whereby a subject of state acquires an object of value through its own efforts, i.e. through a reflexive act“ (Bronwen, Ringham 2000: 26). On the other hand, the *Dictionary of Media and Communications* (2009) defines appropriation as a „process by which innovative or resistant cultural forms are taken up and commodified by media or culture industries“ (Danesi 2009: 25).

In order to expand the notion of appropriation, we offer a more detailed interpretation as found in an article by Richard A. Rogers, *From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation* (2006):

Cultural appropriation, defined broadly as the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture, is inescapable when cultures come into contact, including virtual or representational contact. Cultural appropriation is also inescapably intertwined with cultural politics. It is involved in the assimilation and exploitation of marginalized and colonized cultures and in the survival of subordinated cultures and their resistance to dominant cultures (Rogers 2006: 474).

The first part of the definition points out two perspectives: one includes the implications of globalization and hybridization processes, whereas the other brings forth the idea of involuntary, i.e. non-intentional acts.<sup>21</sup>

We find the element of non-intentionality relevant because it highlights the level of engagement happening between the center and periphery, creating a space of constant struggle and blending of distinctive cultural elements..

It is possible to outline at least four types of cultural appropriation: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation and transculturation. Cultural exchange concerns „the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres and/or technologies between

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/appropriate>

<sup>21</sup> Particular works can be consulted when it comes to the mentioned processes. For example, Jan Nederveen Pieterse in his article *Globalization as Hybridization* (1994) discusses the notion of globalization by viewing it as intertwined with hybridization. Furthermore, selected works pertaining to the aforementioned topic can be found in *Globalization, Cultural Identities, and Media Representations* (2006) edited by Natascha Gentz and Stefan Kramer. Last but not least, *Media and Cultural Theory* (2005) edited by James Curran and David Morley, provide a quality overview ranging from the roles and functions of media in a globalized world.

cultures with roughly equal levels of power“ (Rogers 2006: 477). Cultural dominance purports the act of struggle between the dominant and subordinate culture; it refers to „the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance“ (Ibid.). Cultural exploitation and transculturation concern „the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture, without substantive reciprocity“ in the former, and „cultural elements created from and/or by multiple cultures“ in the latter (Ibid.).

We may notice from the last paragraph that power struggle is a prevailing process and leads us towards the process of reappropriation. It is defined as „the phenomenon whereby an ostracized group revalues an externally imposed negative label or symbol by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label or symbol“ (Galinsky et al. 2003: 231). Two important examples can be brought forward: the words *nigger* and *queer*, the first one reclaimed by groups of African-Americans, and the second one by gays and lesbians. Both groups aimed to modify the negative connotations of the words in question by means of self-labelling, simultaneously creating a space for re-negotiating the embedded meaning of a label.

Nevertheless, this attempt poses certain difficulties. Although the act of reappropriation enablees these groups to be acknowledged to a certain extent, they predominantly remain in the realm of the periphery. The first reason for this is that the emancipatory use of reappropriation prevails inside the circles of marginalized groups. The second one raises the question of the actual long-term success of reappropriation due to it remaining in the periphery.

## 2. Methodology and the construction of the model of reappropriation

The present chapter will encompass two subsections: Lotman's model of the semiosphere and the notions of fear and shame in culture. Lotman's semiosphere has good potentiality for its application and understanding of the evolution of creative information. This is why we chose the model of the semiosphere for studying the process of reappropriation of obscene language on the example of *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures* (2009).

When attending to the model of the semiosphere, it is important to point out and describe the genealogy of the term in order to make it as clear as possible, as well as to outline the interconnectedness of distinctive disciplines that fueled its evolution. This will be provided in the first subchapter, prior to the one related to notions of fear and shame and their presumed role in culture. Multiple research has been done in relation to fear and shame, ranging from biology, medicine and psychology, to sociology, linguistics and philosophy.<sup>22</sup> The development and manifestation of emotions in people remains a fruitful ground for inquiry. We are focusing on fear and shame because both of these emotions have a strong connection with everyday practices and language, consequently predetermining our actions both in the private and public sphere. Obscene language usage, which is always restricted in public to a certain extent, is an intriguing aspect to observe. Linked to fear and shame, we are often more aware of the limitations of usage of obscene language in public. The usage of obscene language and the relations it has with fear and shame is worth noting also in the context of the private sphere. In this respect *The Ethical Slut* encompasses the private sphere and the process of reading, as well as obscene language usage in the book. Moreover, this raises the questions of how fear and shame may effect the act of reading itself as well as the accomplishment of reappropriation.

### 2.1. Lotman's model of the semiosphere

The semiosphere is a semiotic space outside of which semiosis (i.e. the production of meaning, sign processes) cannot exist (Lotman 2005: 208). Lotman (2005: 207) describes it as

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<sup>22</sup> Some of the examples include Willem Martens article titled *A Multicomponential Model of Shame* (2005), *Culture and Categorization of Emotions* (1991) by the author James A. Russell, and *Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches* (2004) written by Daniel M.T. Fessler.

a „specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space. Only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realised“.

The semiosphere has its origins in two essential terms: the biosphere<sup>23</sup> and the noösphere.<sup>24</sup> The biosphere is the initial stage based on which we can proceed to the noösphere, following the development of Lotman's analogy. The term *biosphere* can be defined as „an organic unity, a space filled with live matter as the sum of all living organisms“ (Veršić 2004: 127).<sup>25</sup> It has its origins in the scientific contributions of Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky<sup>26</sup>, who was the first to recognize the essential role of the biosphere, being the total aggregate of living matter on Earth (Jones 2012: 14).

But Vernadsky is most noted for his work on the biosphere and the question of life in the universe. From the beginning he refused to accept the basic premise of abiogenesis, the idea that life proceeded from a combination of inorganic materials, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen which combined in some mysterious way, to become living matter. Vernadsky saw no scientific evidence that such a process ever occurred. He adhered to the principle enunciated by the 16th Century Italian physician, Francesco Redi, *omnium vivum e vivo*, that life only proceeds from life (Jones 2012: 13).

Furthermore, the noösphere is viewed as a logical consequence of the biosphere and shouldn't be observed in isolation. Vernadsky defines it as a „new form of biogeochemical energy, which might be called the energy of human culture or cultural biogeochemical energy“ (Vernadsky 2012[1938]: 18). Thus the mentioned form of biogeochemical energy creates the noösphere. We view this energy as a force that perpetually fuels the noösphere, establishing a balance between nature (i.e. the biosphere) and mind (i.e. the noösphere). Vernadsky summarizes it in the following manner:

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<sup>23</sup> Bio - word-forming element, from Greek bio-, comb. form of bios "one's life, course or way of living, lifetime".

Sphere - mid-15c., Latinized spelling of Middle English spere (c. 1300) "cosmos; space, conceived as a hollow globe about the world," from Anglo-French espiere, Old French espere (13c., Modern French sphère), from Latin sphaera "globe, ball, celestial sphere" (Medieval Latin spera), from Greek sphaira "globe, ball, playing ball, terrestrial globe," of unknown origin (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Noo – mind (from Greek noos, nous) + sphere (Merriam-Webster 2015).

<sup>25</sup> „[...] biosfera je organsko jedinstvo, prostor ispunjen živom materijom kao sveukupnošću živih organizama“ (Veršić 2004: 127). My translation from Croatian – K.D.

<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945) is a very familiar name in the area of science, particularly in the geological and the so-called „earth sciences“; however, due to a majority of his works being available in Russian, to most of the scientists without knowledge of the latter, his monograph „The Biosphere“ published in 1926. will be the one which is commonly available and known (Jones 2012: 11). Vernadsky was, at the least, a highly inspirational figure with a wide range of interests; from genetic mineralogy, geochemistry, hydrogeochemistry and hydrogeothermy, oceanography, radiogeology, cryology or the study of permafrost, and cosmochemistry (Ibid. 11). To state that he left an impact would be an understatement.

Its manifestation in the predecessors of Man was probably developed over the course of hundreds of millions of years, but it was able to express itself as a geological force only in our time, when *Homo sapiens* has embraced the entire biosphere with his life and cultural work (Vernadsky 2012[1938]: 18).

For us, the notions of biosphere and noösphere present themselves as examples of complementarity between the natural sciences and humanities, a relation that was always present in the works of Yuri Lotman and other Tartu-Moscow scholars. This complementarity leads to a multiplicity of views beyond strictly humanities and/or natural sciences.

The semiosphere is, in this respect, one of the best examples of a model with a high level of applicability and fluidity in its essence. This is pointed out by Peeter Torop in the article titled *Semiosphere and/as the research object of semiotics of culture* (2005), where he shows how the concept of the semiosphere „has been moving from one terminological field to another“ (Torop 2005: 161). He contextualizes the semiosphere by bringing forward the terminological field of TMS, interdisciplinary fields relating to the notions of biosphere and noösphere, metadisciplinarity and associations with culture studies and the question of holism, and finally, the transdisciplinary context (Ibid. 161).

In our current inquiry, the model of the semiosphere finds its place predominantly within the context of the TMS and Lotman's development of the term. Minor inclusions will be made based on the field of cultural studies, pertaining to the notions of centre and periphery as basis of the internal organization of the semiosphere.

The model of the semiosphere, in comparison to the biosphere which consists of the sum of biological life „and the condition for its continuation, is the result and the condition for the development of culture“ (Lotman 1990: 125). The main characteristics of the semiosphere are binarism, asymmetry and heterogeneity. Heterogeneity „is defined both by the diversity of elements and by their different functions“ (Ibid.). The tension between the centre and the periphery leads to the heterogeneity of culture. Binarism can be demonstrated on the example of natural language and culture; in the case of language, we may speak of the opposition on a morphological level between a singular and plural form of a word, whereas binarism in culture is found by means of various examples, such as male / female, good / evil, living / dead etc.

When discussing asymmetry it should be noted that it becomes apparent „in the relationship between the centre and its periphery“ (Ibid. 127). The centre is characterized by established norms and cultural values, whereas the periphery presents itself with a certain level of dislocation; chaos, disorder and disorganization are its common denominators.

Furthermore, the centre / periphery opposition clearly indicates to the notion of the *Other* and alien in culture. With this, we encounter the division of the internal and external space according to which we organize our space and world. The notion of a *boundary* is a crucial mechanism here; it divides the space which we deem as *ours, my own, cultured* in opposed to *their space, other, chaotic, hostile* (Lotman, 1990.:131).<sup>27</sup> The boundary indeed constitutes the cultural identity and distinguishes the familiar, normative culture from a foreign, alien one.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.2. On notions of fear and shame in culture

Yuri Lotman provides us with an important insight on fear and shame and their role in culture. Lotman's perspective concerns our study because of the interrelatedness of fear and shame with the use obscene language. Namely, fear and shame are inextricably linked to taboo and they can be either explicit or implicit manifestations of the existing social and cultural order.

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<sup>27</sup> It might be of interest to point towards the importance of notions such as „boundaries, our, alien“ for Lotman. For the purpose of further exemplifying these terms and their relevance for cultural semiotics, an interest for the semiotics of mirrors arose. Namely, in 1986 there were organized seminars on the latter topic from the side of TMS members. They attended to the already mentioned concepts, as well as mirroring effects as signifying different forms of organization and the usage of semiotics mechanisms for the description of alien (i.e. other) structures. It is possible to find the works on said topic in Sign System Studies, volumes 18, 20, 21 and 22 (1989.), from which we extract Lotman's article titled «К семиотике зеркала и зеркальности» (Towards the semiotics of mirror and specularity) from 1988 also translated into Italian as “La semiotica dello specchio e della specularità”. Furthermore, Massimo Leone, a semiotician from the University of Turin, provides his view on the semiotics of mirrors with the inclusion of Lotman's theory. Leone attends to the topic of religious conversion and the implications it has for one's identity. For this purpose, he brings forward an example of a painting by Artemisia Gentileschi, “La conversione della Maddalena” (Conversion of Magdalene). The article can be acquired in Sign Systems Studies, volume 30.2, 2002 under the title “Boundaries and identities in religious conversion: The mirror”.

<sup>28</sup> „There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality“ (Foucault, 1984.:3-4). The cemetery is a place simultaneously isolated from the centre of the city and located on the periphery, mostly in the outskirts and/or suburban areas. Nevertheless, it is a place inextricably connected to the centre since each family has relatives in the final resting place.

We will offer at least three functions a cemetery has; for one, it is surely the matter of preserving the memory, both on the micro and macro level of a culture/society; second of all, it provides the living with the strong notion of an absent presence of the deceased. Finally, the space in-between the cemetery as a heterotopia and the ordinary cultural space pertains to the notion of boundary in Lotman's view.

Lotman claims that „descriptions that are based on the extraction of norms the violation of which is shame in a given culture, and of norms the obeying of which is dictated by fear, can become a convenient basis for typological classification of cultures“.<sup>29</sup>

We view fear as to a lesser extent driven by the external and more with the *internal* mechanisms of an individual, since these become rooted in one's persona through time. As opposed to the latter, shame, often in correlation with guilt, is most commonly driven by the *external*; with the passing of time, shame is almost consistently lived through with the presence of the *Other*<sup>30</sup>, be it a person, collective or some different element. While fear can be felt in complete isolation, shame is intensified if the *other* is present, and guilt is almost by rule something that arises and grows stronger when the individual is alone.

What everyone experiences in shame is a fearful and chaotic sense of an irresistible and eerie revelation to self, of vulnerability in one's nature that, by indicating one's moral incompetence, isolates and humbles one in the face of what one regards as a sacred community (Katz in: Martens, 2005: 400).

However, there are certain aspects that need to be taken into consideration. The emotions of fear and shame can be said to be perceived and felt differently when experienced publicly or privately. Thus with this we enter into the public and private sphere of everyday life.

In the private, intimate sphere of oneself, shame can be rationalized to a certain extent, being experienced as turned towards oneself, while in the public sphere, it is often perpetuated by the external.

On the other hand, fear can be experienced the other way around, though not by rule since in specific conditions the external elements and events might result with a stronger effect. This said, it is mostly perpetuated in the private sphere by the internal, while the public one is able to provide the function of appeasement.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> „Описания, основанные на выделении норм, нарушение которых в данном коллективе стыдно, и тех, выполнение которых диктуется страхом, могут стать удобной основой для типологических классификаций культур“ (Lotman, 2002: 436). My translation from Russian – K. D.

<sup>30</sup> The centre/periphery opposition quite clearly indicates to the notion of the *Other* and alien in culture. Using the external and internal sphere of culture and the notion of boundary, we may describe the opposition in Lotman's terms, the centre being described as „ours, my own, cultured“ in opposition to the periphery and its characterization as „their space, other, chaotic, hostile“ (Lotman, 1990:131).

<sup>31</sup> Approaching emotions from a sociological perspective, the contribution of Arlie Russell Hochschild is of valuable mention. Published in 1979, her paper titled *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, proves as a highly relevant source when engaging with this area of research. Namely, Hochschild distinguishes two possible approaches to the social ordering of emotive experience; one concerns the study of the social factors that induce or stimulate primary emotions – those passively undergone, while the other aims to study *secondary acts* performed upon the ongoing nonreflective stream of primary emotive experience. „The first approach focuses on how social factors affect what people feel, the second on how social factors affect what people think and do about what they feel“ (Hochschild, 1979: 552).

In the context of this study we need to ask ourselves what is the relation between obscene language and fear and shame. Nuances of language usage often reflect the given social and cultural structure, observable on the example of *The Ethical Slut* and the position of monogamy and the monogamous discourse.

The section addressing the model of reappropriation will underscore the importance of both fear and shame for reappropriation to take place and remain stable, clarifying which of them has priority and why. Furthermore, our analysis is found precisely within the context of the private, intimate sphere where we encounter the reading process in the majority of cases. When the reading material includes obscene language with an additional agenda of reappropriating it, it is necessary to observe the potential role shame and fear might carry for the successfulness of the model of reappropriation.



### ***3. The Ethical Slut***

This chapter analyzes *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures*. This section consists of an introductory subchapter titled *Dominant obscene words and their dynamics*, where we present the obscene words and their quantity of appearance in the provided material. In addition, we will include the information regarding the quantity of appearance of the notions of fear and shame in the same manner.

We will use the method of textual analysis in order to analyze *The Ethical Slut*. Obscene words will be extracted and analyzed by means of: frequency, relation to other words, contrast and contextual restraints and implications, as well as relation to notions such as that of autocommunication and longevity. Explicit reference to fear and shame will be further discussed in the sub-section following the analysis. Explicit references to fear and/or shame will also be taken into account.

#### **3.1. Dominant obscene words and their dynamics**

In *Taboo Lexeme Conditioning and Obscenities in American English* (2013), Alexander Werny outlines four most important criteria which characterize American English Obscenities.

1. They exhibit independent, non-propositional limbic activation, as seen in brain imaging of patients with neurological damage or disorders;
2. They receive highly negative emotional responses from people who find them offensive morally and socially, which influences neurological encoding during lexical acquisition;
3. They have been subjected to censorship by American Church and State, deriving from an English legal system censoring profanities and blasphemies, each consistently influenced by Puritan interests;

4. They violate linguistic taboos, which evolve from two much older taboos in Judeo-Christianity: taboos against the body and taboos against anti-religious language or deity invoking language (Werny 2013: iii).

It is not known with certainty for how long many obscene words have actually been present in language. For some of the obscenities used in *The Ethical Slut*, there is a trace of potential etymological sources, such as in the case of the word *fuck*.

*Fuck* – probably from a general North Sea Germanic word; cf. M.Du. *fokken*, Ger. *ficken* 'fuck', earlier 'make quick movements to and from, flick', still earlier 'itch, scratch'; the vulgar sense attested from 16c (Werny 2013: 16).

In *The Ethical Slut* we extracted four dominant obscene words and their frequency as provided in the table below (Fig. 1). The frequency of appearance and modes of usage of obscene words in the book justifies our focus on them. Besides the selected words, *prick* and *bitch* are used not more than two times in the book and their inclusion does not exhibit a function relevant enough for our analysis.

A potential issue may arise concerning the categorization of *slut* and *fuck* as obscene words, especially due to the increasing usage of the terms in recent years, particularly that of *fuck*. It is worth pointing out that this categorization is widely used. Both the words *slut* and *fuck* are considered as obscene and offensive in American English inasmuch as they meet Werny's four criteria presented at the beginning of this section.

It can be argued that the degree of obscenity of a word, as well as whether something is perceived as such, highly depends on the context in which the word is used. This claim, however, is debatable and should not be taken lightly. For example, the contextual implications of the use of *fuck*, bring forward additional issues that need to be taken into account.

One question concerns the consequences of increased usage of a particular obscene word which then often becomes a common buzzword. This was the case for quite a while with the word *fuck*, especially when used in a more informal setting. Nevertheless, this does not justify the claim that the word *fuck* is not obscene. Our choice regarding *when* and *where* we use certain obscene words enables us to reveal the nuances of existing social structures and taboo practices characterizing it.

The usage of *slut* on the other hand is not as frequent as *fuck*, inasmuch as the word *slut* is directly sexualized and aimed towards women. Furthermore, it does not contain space for

manoeuvre such as the word *fuck* does, most probably because its usage further raises the question of linguistic imparity between men and women.

In the table below we show the frequency of the dominant obscene words in *The Ethical Slut*:

Word	Frequency
slut	90
fuck	24
cunt	6
cock	12

Figure 1. Frequency of dominant obscene words in *The Ethical Slut* (2009)

When it comes to notions of *fear* and *shame*, the former is mentioned sixteen times, whereas the latter shows eighteen occurrences. A subsection following the main body of analysis will be dedicated to the explication of their role in the text.

As it is predictable, the word *slut* is the most common one in *The Ethical Slut*. Its emphasis and frequency uncover the importance of constructing and performing a polyamorous identity throughout the book. The remaining obscene words and the visible lower frequency they exhibit does not mean they have a weaker function – they simply indicate towards the implications of short-term potential for reappropriation, as we will see in examples.

The frequency of the word *slut* exhibits three sub-functions we introduce in more detail in the first chapter: the correlational, descriptive and autobiographical function. All three are a part of the dominant function of the first chapter in the book – the enlightening function. The remaining dominant functions that follow are: the performative function, function of normalization and the imaginative function introduced and explained in accordance with the chapters they belong to.

Our focus is on obscene words that exhibit a stronger and more stable manifestation of the belonging function/s. Moreover, this is done in order not to lose focus by drawing attention to fragments displaying a lower and debatable degree of a specific function. Before starting the analysis, let us observe the main obscene words.

### 3.1.1. *Slut*

Starting off with the word *slut*, the Oxford Dictionary outlines two definitions as follows: *slut* – *noun* (*dissapproving, offensive*) 1. a woman who has many sexual partners; 2. a woman who is very untidy or lazy (Hornby 2000: 1216).

It needs to be pointed out that it has been increasingly present in the public discourse in America during the past years. Aside from the overall media proliferation, there are other reasons for this, one of them regarding the attempt to reclaim the word in the public sphere as a consequence of an incident from 2011 at York University when a Toronto police officer told students „that if women wanted to avoid rape they should not dress like sluts“ (Carr 2013: 24). The result of this statement was a strong reaction in the form of a protest known as SlutWalks which opposed slut-shaming and any form of sex-shaming. Thus the word itself has been used in terms of providing it with an emancipatory and positive meaning, making itself increasingly present.

We want to shortly observe the authors' choice of the word *slut*, since the word *bitch* may be thought as one quite commonly used in American English and potentially applicable. However, this is not the case. The terms *bitch* and *slut* are both gendered terms aimed primarily towards women.

However, the term *bitch* is slightly less sexualized than *slut*. Furthermore, *bitch* seems to be a quite broader term in usage; namely, there are various ways one can be a *bitch* (e.g. annoying and/or enraging someone, being mean and hostile) whereas *slut* always includes an element of promiscuity. Having this in mind, the authors' use of *slut* - especially referring to men and women indiscriminately - is a reasonable one due to its broader potential of applicability.

On a different note, we may raise the question of the influence of American English and the selection of terms in opposition to those used in British English. Namely, we may find *slut* and *bitch* in British English as well, so the connotative differences are similar as the ones outlined above. Due to the latter, it is highly doubtful that British English speakers use *bitch* as equivalent to *slut*. A more likely version of *slut* in British English might be *slag* or *whore* due to them being more directly sexualized.

### 3.1.2. *Fuck*

The word *fuck* is defined as: *verb* 1. to have sex with; 2. a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to express anger, disgust or surprise (Hornby 2000: 520). Nowadays its

usage has increased to an extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether it is becoming a common buzzword. Nevertheless, its inherently negative connotative value persists.

### **3.1.3. *Cock and cunt***

We are left with two remaining words, *cock* and *cunt*. The definitions of the former include: *noun* 1. an adult male chicken; 2. a male of any other bird; 3. a penis (Ibid. 227). The word *cunt* is explained as a: *noun* 1. a woman's vagina and outer sexual organs; 2. a very offensive word used to insult and to show anger or dislike (Ibid. 306).

## **3.2. *Welcome – the enlightening function and the dominant functions of slut***

The first part of the book consists of six subsections: *Who is an Ethical Slut, Myths and Realities, Our Beliefs, Slut Styles, Battling Sex Negativity, Infinite Possibilities*. All of them have the task of showing the reader the existing potential of leading a different and possibly more fulfilling life by means of embracing their sexual needs and desires which are presumably often suppressed in accordance with the dominant norms and values of a given culture. In order to do so, the authors state their agenda from the outset by pointing towards the lack of a polyamorous language and their goal in reclaiming pejorative words usually used to describe people engaged in distinctive sexual behaviour and practices. This language is always derogatory and insulting for polyamorous people, so in order to initiate a change by reappropriating them, the authors focus on four: *slut, fuck, cock* and *cunt*. However, by doing so, they do not describe their material as having a target audience. Rather, they openly state it is intended for everyone, i.e. for people of any sexual orientation and lifestyle who are simply curious and/or seeking change. The availability and openness of the material is further implied by the fact of it being self-help genre. In this respect, aside from a highly important claim stating that „communication with another person is only possible if there is some degree of common memory“ (Lotman 1990: 63), we would also like to direct the reader's attention towards the notion of common knowledge.

Regardless of it being problematic due to its variable nature and dependence on dominant ideologies, it is a relevant element in the process of communication because it carries the

capacity to compensate for the lack of memory. In the case of our material, the reliance on common knowledge is prevalent; the dominant memory is the autobiographical one serving to communicate trust, change and maintain belief.

We can distinguish between a text addressed 'to everyone' and the one addressed to one particular person *known personally* to the speaker (Lotman 1990: 63). We are maintaining our focus on the former, i.e. as being intended for everyone; the self-help genre maintains its popularity by being aimed at, and available for virtually anyone.

Prior to initiating the analysis, it is necessary to identify the three functions of *slut*: correlational, descriptive and autobiographical function. These functions are described as follows.

1. The correlational function provides an impetus for the author and reader to establish a connection by means of identifying themselves with the word and notion of *slut*;
2. The descriptive function consists of depictions of a slut's lifestyle, thus creating new fragments of cultural memory communicated through non-normative language;
3. The autobiographical function provides the reader with a sense of security and makes the authorial voice seem more convincing and credible.

In the following paragraph we are presenting a quote where the word *slut* exhibits a correlational function:

So who is an ethical slut? We are. Many, many others are. Maybe you are too. If you dream of freedom, if you dream of intimacy both hot and profound, if you dream of an abundance of friends and flirtation and affection, of following your desires and seeing where they take you, you've already taken the first step (Easton, Hardy 2009: 3).

A correlational function arises here; the authorial voice aims to relate to the reader by setting aside the negatively loaded values of the word *slut* as a result of connecting them to implied notions of *freedom*, *excitement*, *sociality* and *risk-taking*. As we will see in what follows, the position of the word *slut* is very often in service of depicting a world that *might be*, when locating it among generally affirmative notions can lead to more stable grounds for reappropriation. Consequently, this function is relevant in creating a connection between the author and reader throughout the text, and taking action *together*. The correlational functional isn't without difficulties in this particular case; namely, it juxtaposes the unrealized vs. the real world, the former characterized with an idealized perspective of limitless possibilities,

whereas the latter contains real-life obstacles. In this quote we are further able to see the prism through which a reader is presented with the notion of the *ethical slut* – the emancipatory one.

The following quote brings forward the descriptive function:

So we are proud to reclaim the word „slut“ as a term of approval, even endearment. To us, a slut is a person of any gender who celebrates sexuality according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you. Sluts may choose to have solo sex or to get cosy with the Fifth Fleet. They may be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, radical activists or peaceful suburbanites (Easton, Hardy Ibid. 4).

A descriptive function of the word *slut* is constituted within depictions of how the life of an *ethical slut* might look like *if* certain guidelines are followed. These guidelines simultaneously *offer* a specific scenario of how ones life might look like, but they also *condition* it and consequently bring the reader into a process of negotiation with him/herself. It engages the reader by positioning him/her between two worlds he/she projects; the one composed of norms compatible with the central, monogamous discourse, and the imagined world compatible with the peripheral, polyamorous one. The descriptive function can be defined as the one which further engages the reader's imagination, making him/her increasingly active in communicating with oneself. We find this feature important for this particular example of self-help genre because it relies on readers actually *applying* what they read in order to improve their lives.

Because of this, the descriptive function presents itself as the one which *draws* its reader further into the text and its message. We may relate this with Lotman's article *The Text and the Structure of its Audience* (1982 [1977]) where he discusses the relationship established between text and audience. When attending to the issue of how the message influences the addressee, he clearly states:

This phenomenon is bound up in the fact that any text (and especially a literary one) contains in itself what we should like to term the *image of the audience* and that this image actively affects the real audience by becoming for it a kind of normatizing code. This is imposed on the consciousness of the audience and becomes the norm for its own image of itself, being transferred from the text into the sphere of the real behavior of the cultural collective (Lotman 1982).

The text we are dealing with and the nature of its discourse have at its disposal high potential of transference into the real behavior of a given collective. This is clear especially if we accentuate that the mere choice of this text from the side of the majority of readers uncovers their conscious or unconscious intention of *modifying* their behavioral practices in some manner. Thus the descriptive function of the word *slut* is able to initiate the creation of

new meaning when positioning the term in textual fragments depicting lifestyle possibilities. The latter can be realized or not yet realized, enabling the reader to create new fragments of cultural memory communicated through non-normative language.

Having in mind the notion of the *image of the audience* as inherent to any text, we want to bring forward one element of relevance for *The Ethical Slut*; it is targeted to both a monogamous or polyamorous reader.

Regardless of the readers' probable interest aimed towards the content which calls into question the disparity between monogamy and polyamory, their reception of the material is likely to be restrained. Seemingly banal, the reason for this is that the acquired behavioral and linguistic norms of monogamy are so embedded into one's being, that any effort of stepping outside of it is arduous. This is not to say that the polyamorous reader will be devoid of difficulties; his/hers will be of a different kind because they are prone to be inclined towards stepping out of specific normative constraints.

Sluts share their sexuality the way philanthropists share their money: because they have a lot of it to share, because it makes them happy to share it, because sharing makes the world a better place. Sluts often find that the more love and sex they give away, the more they have: loaves-and-fishes miracle in which greed and generosity go hand in hand to provide more for everybody. Imagine living in sexual abundance (Easton, Hardy 2009: 4).

The descriptive function further contains an instance of communicating revolutionary potential, essentially juxtaposing *slut* with the notion of making the world a better place; this implied tendency towards the revolutionary potential of the word and proposed identity embedded in *slut* is present in multiple examples in the text as a leitmotif. Imagination plays an important role when it comes to the potential of transference of a novel self and its various practices onto the cultural collective.

The third function of the word *slut* is the autobiographical one. We remind the reader that, when speaking about the self-help genre, it needs to be taken into account that it very much depends on the success of the perceived validity of the discourse used. When the goal is to motivate a level of initiating change in the life of the reader, it is relevant to provide (at least seemingly) authentic examples from the side of the authorial voice. This builds a more stable connection between the author and reader. In addition, the fact that *The Ethical Slut* is the product of two authors results with two characteristics strengthening the autobiographical function: the often used form *we know, we feel, we experienced* provides the reader with a sense of security, while on the other hand, it makes the discourse seem more convincing and credible.



So who is an ethical slut? We are (Easton, Hardy 2009: 3).  
 She has always been a slut (Ibid. 4-5).  
 Janet lived as a teenaged slut in college [...] (Ibid. 5)  
 Some of us find these parts of our lives so important that sluttiness is a basic part of our identity [...] (Ibid. 6).  
 So, whether you're an old friend or a new acquaintance, we're happy to welcome you into our book, and into our slutty, happy lives (Ibid. 7).  
 The examples and quotes in this book have been drawn from throughout the huge array of lifestyles we have encountered in our combined seven decades of sluthood: there are infinite „right“ ways to be sexual, and we want to affirm all of them (Ibid. 8).

Aside from the outlined reasons dealing with the importance of the autobiographical function, we need to turn to its most determining feature; it belongs to the 'I-I' relation in communication. It finds its inception in the active recollection of one's memories and continuous self-referencing, leading towards the projection of one's self-identity onto a text. Thus if we ask ourselves how is the authors' identity communicated within the text, it leads us straight towards the word *slut* which executes a performative function which will be attended to in the sub-chapter that follows.

In the examples depicting the autobiographical function of the word *slut*, we find two more forms of the latter. The first, also a noun, is *sluttiness*, conceived as an inherent element of the authors' identity and best viewed as connected with the descriptive function, whereas the second one, *sluthood*, has the purpose of communicating the identity of a *slut* on the macro-level, not only one of the individual and/or small groups.<sup>32</sup>

The correlational, descriptive and autobiographical functions are found as dominant sub-functions of the word *slut* in the belonging chapter. Noting that all of them are used in order to affirm the potential of a new lifestyle which opposes established norms, we are characterizing them with an encompassing function – the enlightening function. It is observable in the following, strongest examples:

Business partnership, deep attachment, stable parenting, personal growth, care and companionship in old age are all well within the abilities of the slut (Easton, Hardy 2009: 15).  
 We wrote this book to help you become an ethical slut (Ibid. 21).  
 Thousands and thousands of ethical sluts are proving every day that the old „everybody knows“ myths don't have to be true (Ibid. 26).  
 Sluts come in all the various forms and styles that humans come in: men and women in all cultures, from all parts of the world, of all religions and lifestyles, rich and poor, with formal and informal education (Ibid. 29).

We view the enlightening function as an important element for the potential establishment of the model of reappropriation since it provides an instance of creativity responsible for

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<sup>32</sup> Additional examples would be *nationhood* and *parenthood*.

triggering an additional, third perspective regarding the existing matter. The other two perspectives are those of the authors' and reader, while the third one comes to life in the reader's imagination and confirms its position of a tool capable of initiating change leading towards a successful text – culture transfer.

### **3.3. *The Practice of Sluthood* – performative function**

The chapter titled *The Practice of Sluthood* encompasses various skills and habits that aim towards the evolution of the slut's identity. Among them we find many wishes and desires of polyamorous people, as well as the positioning of monogamy and polyamory in the context of one's rights and opportunities, primarily when it comes to the issue of having and raising children. The chapter can be further divided into two parts: the first one positions the reader in the mostly unrealized potential of the polyamorous world, whereas the second one draws out the obstacles of the real world.

The notion of *sluthood* communicates identity on the macro-level; this is so because *sluthood*, as well as the notions of *nationhood* and *parenthood*, implies a broader social structure consisting of a specific collective. In this respect *sluthood* signifies a *slut's* identity on the level of a collective.

The notion of practice in itself carries at least two relevant meanings; that of repetitive action which is in relation with the notion of performativity, and that of materialization, i.e. physical manifestation of a specific belief, norm and/or attitude.

First of all, we need to define performativity and in order to do so, we are turning to Judith Butler and her concept of gender performativity. According to the latter, people construct their identities by means of communication, or put in more specific terms:

Performativity is thus not a singular „act“, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition [...]. Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names (Butler 1993: 12-13).

Two elements are pertinent to this section: the reiteration of norms and the performative as discursive practice enacting or producing that which it names. In the context of this particular chapter, we find the previously outlined important because it emphasizes the importance of reiteration which brings forth one important question: how does the reiteration of non-

normative discourse affect the potential for reappropriation? In this sense, we view the reiteration of non-normative discourse as compatible with the material used for analysis.

Namely, we observe it on the level of reiteration of obscene language within *The Ethical Slut*, whereas the performative as discursive practice enacting/producing that which it names can be found in everyday practices.

Thus we propose a view of the two elements as suitable for the relation *text – culture* and the transference from the former to the latter. In this part of the analysis the slut's identity is presented to us as communicated through various practices and activities which continuously form it. Having distinguished this, it is important to point out that the title itself carries a high level of compatibility with the content. Focusing on applying various methods and guidelines provided by the authors, we encounter sections dealing with *slut possibilities* and *slut skills*, all in favour of illustrating the potential of a *slut* lifestyle to the reader. Before proceeding further we are offering dominant examples:

Great sluts are made, not born (Ibid. 63).

The people we know who succeed at ethical sluthood usually have a set of skills that helps them forge their pathway cleanly, honestly, and with a minimum of unnecessary pain (Ibid. 65).

On that note, the second quote is the first one implicitly uncovering the function of normalization that becomes explicit closer to the end of this part and prolonging into the third. What happens is the immersion of obscene words *slut* and *fuck* into the monogamous discourse on polyamorous living; we consider it a function of normalization because it draws the mentioned words towards the normative discourse. Furthermore, being immersed in it raises a very important question; there is actually no other discourse by means of which the authors could have communicated the polyamorous lifestyle and identity. Having no vocabulary of its own, it needs to adapt to the existing one, along with its norms which may consequently prove as an aggravating circumstance for the process of reappropriation. If the words are directed towards the center, the result will be either their adaptability to the existing norms and values, or the rejection from the center that results with them remaining in the periphery.

Returning to the first quote, it is a reference to Simone de Beauvoir's statement according to which „One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman“<sup>33</sup>, implying a process of creation

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<sup>33</sup> From her book *The Second Sex* (1973), where she states, among other things, that gender is an aspect of identity which is gradually acquired.

which is simultaneously creative and emancipatory, both of which aim to be accomplished by means of language.

To be an ethical slut you need to have very good boundaries that are clear, strong, flexible, and, above all, conscious (Ibid. 71).

When you're coupled but cruising solo, please do remember to mention to your cruisee that you have a partner at home. Some people will be delighted to receive this news and others will not, but full disclosure is the ethical part of ethical sluthood (Ibid. 89).

The performative function of the word *slut* directs us towards the conditioning of its creation and realization by exemplifying specific skills which need to be acquired. This raises the question of what type of skills the authors are putting an emphasis on. Most of them belong to the sphere of communicating one's emotions and being honest, respectful, with clean intentions. Thus we observe a *slut* as *being* mature and rational, wise and honest; manifestation of which is the state of being a *slut* and developing into the higher level of *sluthood*. In this sense, we want to discuss the notion of *ethical* as it is most frequently used in this chapter of the material, and overall 68 times. The Oxford Dictionary defines *ethical* as:

1. connected with beliefs and principles about what is right and wrong
2. morally correct or acceptable (Hornby 2000: 427)

We find the choice of this particular notion fairly interesting; in the majority of cases positioned as preceding the word *slut*, the two in combination are an oxymoron. This figure of speech observed in the context of the authors' usage and agenda, contains a two-fold function: in the normative and monogamous discourse it serves to confirm the latter's dominance, whereas in the case of the polyamorous one, it takes over an emancipatory role. Due to the two of them overlapping within the material and resulting with the emergence of the function of normalization, the notion of the *ethical slut* makes it actually harder for the reappropriation to take place. This is so because the notion of *ethical* is so highly embedded with notions regarding what is considered as moral behaviour, that it consequently annuls the goal. Two of them combined might be a subversive attempt to a certain degree, but their influence is short-term.

In clarifying this further we will turn towards Lotman's notion of longevity of texts, further proving as a relevant component for the composition of a model of reappropriation. „Culture, as a mechanism for organizing and preserving information in the consciousness of the community, raises the specific problem of longevity. [...] The longevity of texts forms a hierarchy within the culture, one usually identified with the hierarchy of values“ (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 214-215). If the preservation of memory is one of the functions of text, then

the performative function plays an important role when we speak of the creation and inclusion of new fragments of cultural memory communicated through non-normative language. In order to make this at least an option, two aspects need to be factored in:

1. Culture needs to allow for a reappraisal of its values to take place (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 215)
2. An accumulation and increased consummation of texts including the non-normative, peripheral discourse is needed in the course of time encompassing a few generations

Two potential outcomes are probable: either the center will adapt the mentioned elements, making them its own as a consequence of reiteration, or their increased presence may initiate a perpetual tension which leads to a creation of a novel, polyamorous vocabulary.

In the following quotes we are able to witness the fluidity of the usage of *slut* and its transitioning functionwise, as pointed out earlier. Here the performative function slides into the one of normalization by raising and focusing on the question of parenting implications.

We want our kids to have good information and freedom of choice, and they are often living in neighborhoods and going to schools where many parents believe that kids should be denied all information about sex (or else they might turn out to be sluts like us) (Ibid. 102).

Single sluts with no previous connection to children may find themselves in a position of needing to learn how to deal with children in their extended family (Ibid. 105).

The following quote, however, has at its focus the word *fucking*:

While we all make mistakes, the hallmark of a skillful slut is to learn from them and keep going. Which brings us to revenge fucking. It is truly nasty to arrange to have sex with one person to get back at another. To arouse one person's insecurities, jealousy, and other painful feelings on purpose is dishonorable, and to use another person as a puppet in your play is disrespectful and most often downright abusive (Ibid. 80).

This example is used for the purpose of exemplifying non-desirable behavior. *Fucking* is found in the context of particular keywords: *skillful*, *revenge*, *dishonorable* and *disrespectful*, three of them showing characteristics of human behavior, and one standing for the practice of *revenge fucking*. The performative function of the latter is exhibited strongly by means of its position and resolution in behaviour usually frowned upon; initiating from the word *skillful*, we are brought to the idea of *revenge fucking* which destabilizes the established positive connotative values of the former.

It presupposes sluts as main actors in what is clearly deemed as immoral behavior, demonstrated with *dishonor* and *disrespect*. The two are not uncommon terms describing people exhibiting any kind of sexual behavior which stands out from the proscribed one.

Thus, the performative function of *fucking* reduces the potential for reappropriation due to its exclusive positioning within the identity performance of a slut as perceived by the center.

### 3.4. *Navigating challenges* – function of normalization

Introduced in the previous subchapter, the function of normalization takes over a dominant position in the second half of *The Ethical Slut*. We define the function of normalization as the one taking place when a particular obscene word is taken into the core, i.e. monogamous discourse. This is visible in the case when obscene language is found in the context of monogamous, predominantly heteronormative practices such as marriage, the process of raising children etc. At first glance this may not seem highly significant. We argue that it is indeed far-reaching. If we were to *think* about the aspects raised above (having children and/or being married), the majority of people usually form an idea consisting of a monogamous, heteronormative couple. This is inevitably accompanied with a monogamous, heteronormative language as a tool for expressing the monogamous lifestyle. In a context regarding love and relationships, *we* and *us* always stands for *the couple*. The language is so embedded in the dominant practice of monogamy that any arrangement slightly differing from it needs to be additionally explained and specified.<sup>34</sup> In *Navigating challenges* the authors' focus is laid on guidelines for successful communication when dealing with jealousy, the importance of constructive discussions, conflicts and compromises, as well as nuances of polyamorous coupling.

We chose the first quote containing the notion of *jealousy* because it manifests an important level of the function of normalization. Let us keep in mind that one of the main linguistic implications of polyamory is the lack of a language as a means for expressing emotions. Jealousy is an example of this lack due to the common misconception according to which this emotion is reserved for monogamous couples and is a manifestation of affection

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<sup>34</sup> For example, if a conversation would raise the topic of romantic and/or sexual involvement of someone, almost any scenario goes and is easily stated if it pertains to the realm of monogamy. Other cases, however, where a person may be in a relationship with two (or more) people, it brings forth the issue of modes of expressing this with terms such as having *multiple partners*, *being polyamorous* or *being in love with more people*. This is usually more likely to be perceived as *immature* and *temporary* rather than acknowledged as lifestyle and practice as monogamy is.

and caring. On the other hand, polyamorous people are commonly viewed as simply being adventurous and not particularly caring with whom they engage with.<sup>35</sup>

Jealousy is not exclusive to sluts; it's an emotion we all have to deal with (Ibid. 109).

When appealing to one's emotions it is fairly easy to initiate an empathetic attitude towards a person and/or situation. In the case of the first example we see this by means of having the word *slut* positioned in a context of a collective action common to everyone. In the case of the monogamous reader, this may actually be an element which might strengthen the imaginative function (where the *Other* doesn't seem so alien), whereas the polyamorous reader would be able to attain a sense of security by not feeling alone. Not only are we able to outline an empathetic attitude, but a process of demystification embedded in that of normalization: „Jealousy is not exclusive to sluts...“ implies the existence of a casual, nonchalant attitude and comprehension of the behavior of sluts as *not* jealous or sensitive, decoding it almost by rule in accordance to the norms and values of the center.

Thus we can decipher an aspiration of the text towards demystifying it through normalization by means of appealing to an emotion which is one of the dominant ones connected to the practice of monogamy and the monogamous discourse. Function of normalization proceeds throughout the remaining quotes.

I am a slut, I want to be a slut, I will never promise monogamy again. I will never be a piece of property again, no matter how valuable that property is considered. Joe made a feminist of me – a feminist slut (Ibid. 109).

In this passage we can see an example of normalization through the inclusion of the autobiographical function, together resulting with friction resolving in an illusory oxymoron, i.e. the feminist slut. In this case normalization is used in a limited matter, once again aiming at a subversive attempt by counter-imposing words *feminist* and *slut*. However difficult the latter may seem to find a standfast, this perceived predicament is more easily resolved than that of the more frequent usage of the *ethical slut*. Surely, the word *feminist* is embedded with multiple nuances of meaning evolving during the 20th century onwards, but it is not limited by it to the same extent that the notion of *ethical* is in its long and intense relation to religion and moral. Hence, the actual ability to choose a specific lifestyle is provided in the *feminist slut* and its role is emancipatory. On a second note, the autobiographical function of *slut*

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<sup>35</sup> This, of course, may happen in both cases – polyamory and monogamy, and it is purely individual. However, we wanted to point towards the present, dominant disparity between the two.

shows the following: the transition from one lifestyle to another while rejecting the former and performing a new self within sluthood.

Some people find it surprising to learn that a slut can experience overwhelming insecurities, but the truth is that sluts are just as nervous as anyone else, and skills to allay our anxieties were not taught to us in our cradles (Ibid. 133).

Chris and Laurie have had two children in the eleven years since this interview and are still happily slutty (Ibid. 150).

Let us observe the above two quotes together; in both cases, the idea of having children is introduced, first on the implicit level, then on the explicit. The former integrates emotions manifested within the empathetic attitude and equalization with other people which again, immersed into the central discourse, exhibits normalization. In opposition to the focus mostly being on the word *slut* in singular form, the incorporation of a couple having children and being *slutty* is predominant in the section on child-rearing. Since having children is, in the majority of cases and cultural contexts, considered an inherent part of adulthood and couplehood, it is not a surprise that the authors decided to include a section discussing it. Due to sexual minorities either being forbidden and/or limited when it comes to having children in many cultures, the stronger the reader empathizes with the text, the more effective the function of normalization gets. This is a potential advantage for the process of reappropriation because it allows for *sluts* to be perceived as mothers, fathers, as families, not as an aberration when speaking about the latter.

The level of empathy from the reader's side relies upon the type of reader more than in other examples. This is due to the interrelatedness of the function of normalization in the center. Namely, if we were to divide readers into polyamorous and monogamous ones, we would be operating with two worlds; one that has at its disposal both the vernacular and official layers of openly communicating their identity, whereas the other aims to make itself a part of that world and seeks to be acknowledged. In this sense, we encounter the realized and un-realized world by means of language colliding in the minds of the readers. In accordance, Lotman himself points out the following:

A text can be defined by the type of memory it needs for it to be understood. By reconstructing the type of 'common memory' which a text and its consumers share, we shall discover the 'readership image' hidden in the text. [...] A reader's personality, which is a semiotic unity, is always variable and capable of being 'tuned to the text'. On its side too, the readership image, since it is not explicit but merely inherent to the text as a potential position, is also subject to variation (Lotman 1990: 64).



We have pointed out earlier that *The Ethical Slut* is characterized as intended for everyone from the side of the authors themselves, as well as lacking individuality which makes it seem generic. The characteristic should not be perceived as a disadvantage because its availability to a wide range of potential audience may contribute for the imaginative function to strengthen in the readers' minds, developing as a collective idea helping the process of reappropriation and its potential transference from text to culture. The text and the reader unavoidably fall under each other's influence and continuously modify each other.

We cannot rank each and every one of us on some hierarchical ladder or who is or is not the most desirable or the better fuck (114).

The word *fuck* which gradually becomes more common finds its low frequency in the current section as a result of the obvious reason of topicality. Although the authors' usage of *slut* finds its place even in the section on parenthood, the word *fuck* is limited and confirms the function of normalization by means of manifesting it with a statement which is quite often found within the monogamous discourse. Someone being a *good fuck* is used as a compliment, most commonly in groups of younger people. However, as opposed to the word *fuck* used in the example in the next sub-chapter, this one is not provided with a novel role. It balances between its status of being complimentary and derogatory, as if depicting the tension of *our own – Other* on a micro-level.

### **3.5. *Sluts in love* – function of normalization**

In this sub-chapter we encounter topics encompassing a vast array of perspectives regarding the possibilities and approaches to establishing relationships, being in a couple, introducing other potential partners into this couple and exploring different sexual practices. Observable already from the title, the overall focus relies on depicting nuances of love reminding us of an often misused cliché according to which love is found in multiple and distinctive forms. On a different note, positioning side by side two notions rarely found as forming a joint, ameliorated meaning, *sluts in love* activates the imaginative function defined as juxtaposing the real world and imagined, yet unrealized world. pertaining to the sphere of a world. It becomes explicit in the final part of the book, whereas its prior manifestation can be found in

the end of this part, as we will soon show. Hence the function of normalization is the dominant one in this chapter as well:

If, for whatever reason, the online polyamory community doesn't feel like the right place for your quest, there are many options for seeking out other sluts in person. It is difficult to find sluts in dance clubs – the music is often too loud for an exchange of ideas or ambitions. Try searching the web for 'ethical slut munch' or 'polyamory munch' in your area, and meet some people who like to get together and talk about the lifestyle (Ibid. 185).

As implied, the purpose of this quote is to show how to make connections to other people, potential partners and lovers. We can see the following relation: difficulty (*finding* sluts) – proposed solution (using online sources to do so), both of which can be observed as an obstacle leading to a resolution. This particular example contains a rather strong function of normalization due to the immersion of *slut* into a common monogamous model for meeting new people. Let us outline it in a basic manner.

The choice of positioning the word *slut* in a more or less modified version of the monogamous model for meeting potential partners actually creates a difficulty for reappropriating it along with other obscene words that follow. Locating it within the context of making new acquaintances by immersing it in a widely accepted model creates a setback for the authors' initial goal since *slut* becomes immersed into a cultural code of the center. As a result, this directs us towards questioning the possibility of a long-term model of reappropriation, more of which we see in the following examples:

Sluts relate in as many combinations and styles as you can possibly imagine, and more (Ibid. 190).

Some of our best friends are people we met because someone we were fucking was fucking them too (Ibid. 202).

Although the appeal of the first quote lies in its undertones on abundance and choice, it does not provide the word *slut* with a function other than confirming that of normalization. First of all, sluts as actualizing themselves in a variety of modes shortly evokes the imaginative function communicating the illusion of having no limits. However, we still live in a world where this process of relating is very much regulated by the center, making a lot of its forms manifesting at the periphery. Thus, in the quote at hand we observe the evocation of the imaginative function which resolves itself within normalization; notions of abundance and choice are what surrounds us on a daily basis within the consumer culture and society we are immersed in. The discourse regarding the *freedom of choice* stems from this and annuls most

potential for creative change and the reappropriation of *slut*. It will simply absorb it and adapt for the potential use and the maintenance of existing norms.

Interestingly, the word *fucking* is used as a cause and result of new acquaintances appearing because of its role in some polyamorous relationships. Namely, in this sense it operates as a tool for expanding one's circle of friends and/or partners/lovers as a consequence of having mutual sexual partners. This, of course, is a characteristic located predominantly in polyamorous relationships, and in the quote at hand, it is possible to extract the potential for reappropriation. Within the function of normalization, *fucking* is used as applied in the mentioned context of meeting new people, something we will by rule fail to encounter in a monogamous discourse. Providing the word *fucking* with a novel role strengthens its probability for reappropriation because it activates the enlightenment function responsible for initiating the instance of creativity.

Now let's talk about parts that involve lips and nipples and clits and cocks and orgasms (Ibid. 226).

The glorious miracle of sexual anatomy is that any of these awakenings can set off the swelling in the loins, lips, nipples, cocks and cunts, which awakens lots more intense nervous networks buried inside us, till we are all lit up like fireworks (Ibid. 227).

The imaginative function is invoked within the dominant one, that of normalization. However, in this particular usage, it does not maintain its focus on the yet unrealized, imagined world invoked in the reader and further developing in his/her imagination. Here, obscene words *cock* and *cunt* appeal to the corporeal part of one's being.

We can easily distinguish this transition from the first half of the book from the second one focusing more on the sexual aspect of being a slut and its attention directed towards feelings, attitudes and general sense of well being. The corporeal part of one's persona is inextricably linked to one's mind; as people are visual beings, the mere process of reading such and similar fragments of texts results in a moment when the imaginative function strives to realize itself by bodily means and/or remembers physical sensations of the sexual kind. It is not uncommon for the usage of obscene words such as *cock* and *cunt* to be frequent in affective states as that of arousal, when many inhibitions are either abolished or simply set aside temporarily. This, however, makes the mentioned words remain within the central and normative sphere because their usage is adapted to it in this specific affective state. Outside of it, they will still be decoded as derogatory and offensive, making it a short-term reclamation depending on contextual suitability.

Avoid fragile antiques or pricey designer clothes if you want to fuck in them (Ibid. 259).

The latter quote is presented as a matter of practicality on first sight. Although it confirms normalization, its implication visible in the discrepancy between the first and last part of the sentence is interestingly communicated. Partially conditioning a sexual activity, the authors roughly outline the following relation: *avoid fragile antiques – fuck in them*. *Fragile antiques* will direct a reader to associate them as belonging to a certain heritage, often equated with notions of high culture. To avoid having sexual intercourse in/wearing them implies not only the state of being uncomfortable, but also of damaging a presumably valuable object as a result of a physical, instinctive urge.

### **3.6. A Slut Utopia – imaginative function**

The book ends with the chapter titled *A Slut Utopia*. It consists of a rather optimistic view and hopefulness on the potential of creating and establishing a new world open to various types of relationships romantically and sexually, celebrating the possibilities of multiple simultaneous relationships. Rather short, its core is found under the subtitled section *A Slut Manifesto*.

The dominant function of *slut* is the imaginative one, viewed best on the basis of the following example:

Our vision of utopia has free love, in all its forms, as the foundation of our beliefs about reality, about possibility, about staying in the moment and planning the future. We believe that sexual freedom helps us to see our lives as they really are, with the honesty to perceive ourselves clearly and the fluidity to let us move onward as our needs alter, as a changing and growing partners in a changing and growing world. We see ethical sluthood leading us to a world where we respect and honor each individual's boundaries more than we honor any preconceived set of rules about what their boundaries ought to be (Ibid. 270).

Defining this section a manifesto, we are aware that we can anticipate a declaration containing particular beliefs and motives of a certain group or individual. Inherent to a manifesto is the notion of change, an element which is present throughout the book. Furthermore, the notion of the utopia<sup>36</sup> bears high relevance; signifying an ideal, even perfect place for life viewed as impossible to actually establish, it influences the remaining section strongly.

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<sup>36</sup> Utopia – 1551, from Modern Latin *Utopia*, literally „nowhere“, coined by Thomas More, from Greek *ou* „not“ + *topos* „place“. Extended to any perfect place by 1610 (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016).

A strong imaginative function of the word *slut* is invoked in the quote. We define it as a function that juxtaposes the real and imagined world, further creating space for the inception of an idea to take place in the reader's mind. Implicitly proclaiming a particular lifestyle as one that will consequently lead to more freedom primarily sex wise, the above quote actually reflects the real state of affairs and the dominance of the monogamous, central discourse. It further leads us to the importance of longevity since it is necessary for the idea of the imagined world to be invoked and sustained in the reader's mind by means of the imaginative function. Thus, we need a transition from text to culture to bring this idea to life; from the imaginative and performative function in text, to the performative one in culture with non-normative language as a tool.

To have a chance of this happening, we remind of two elements of importance raised earlier:

1. Culture needs to allow for a reappraisal of its values to take place (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 215)
2. An accumulation and increased consummation of texts including the non-normative, peripheral discourse is needed in the course of time encompassing a few generations

These two elements are inextricably linked: in order for the first to be actualized, the second needs to take place. However, the first one has priority because the permission for the reappraisal of culture's values is not the same as allowing for different values to be acknowledged and present in opposed to being rejected. Hence the imaginative function is the one which finally allows for the accumulation and increased consummation of texts including the non-normative discourse. An *idea* needs to be embedded in one's mind and seek external embodiment in order to initiate the potential of crossing from text to culture.

### **3.7. Fear and shame in *The Ethical Slut***

As opposed to obscene words in the text and their ability to uncover particular norms and values, the explicit usage of fear and shame in the book uncovers their regulatory role. This regulatory role is primarily found in the context of sexual behavior and the limitations characterizing it. Shame will be more tied to the context of sexual behavior than fear. Even during the reading process we may decode certain information not only about our personal attitude towards something, but also about subtle nuances of the cultural and social structure

we belong to. Will these be manifested because of us feeling uncomfortable, uneasy or by simply blushing is individual, but shame will remain as their dominant expression.

It is interesting to consider why shame can be so powerful even when we are alone, although it is not surprising. Two elements come into play; memory and imagination. Memory is based on personal experiences and recollections of actions/events which can make us blush by mere thinking about them and reinforce shame internally. Imagination, on the other hand, will be reinforced externally because the aspects of our being found within it are often those we do not usually put on display for others to witness. In short, even considering something that did not actually happen can potentiate feelings of shame and be proof of entrenched norms. Thus, we view fear and shame as not only regulating our behavior in the public sphere but also the intimate one, which is the inception of the reproduction of our everyday self.

In *The Ethical Slut*, the word *fear* appears 41 times, whereas we encounter *shame* 23 times. In all of the occurrences they are located in the context of sexuality, sexual practices and limitations. Below we offer the most symptomatic examples that include the notions of fear and shame:

Since we all have desires, puritanical values lead inevitably to self-loathing, hatred of our bodies and our turn-ons, and fear and guilt over our sexual urges (Ibid. 23).

We see ourselves surrounded by the walking wounded – by people who have been deeply injured by fear, shame, and hatred of their own sexual selves (Ibid. 23).

We don't want to terrify the kids, and we don't want them to come into their own adult sexual lives with the belief that sex is dirty and shameful (Ibid. 102).

Shame, and the beliefs we were taught that our bodies, our desires, and sex are dirty and wrong, make it very hard to develop healthy sexual self-esteem (Ibid. 230).

The above quotes show the presence of the notion of *fear* as weaker than those of *shame*. Considering *fear* and its prevalent regulatory role in the external, public sphere, the regulatory role of *shame* positioned primarily within the intimate, private sphere takes over a higher level of importance during the reading process. It awakens the *self* and its set of existing norms and beliefs, as well as the attitude towards them. Because of this, we may interpret shame as obstructing the successfulness of reappropriation on the textual level, whereas fear hinders its transfer to the cultural level. Both of them are indeed complementary, but their intensification is in accordance with the existing level of cultural and social restrictions and regulations.

*Shame*, as manifested during the reading process is the primary symptom of the social structure a person is a part of, while fear is the second one. While reading, the reader

communicates with himself/herself the established norms constituting the social structure while bringing them into question primarily by means of the imaginative function which opposes the real and imagined, unrealized world. The *idea* of reappropriation is awakened and/or strengthened in the reader's mind, but when correlated with the manifestation of fear and shame, it will remain an *idea* in the majority of cases.

Thus, even *while* reading, obscene words which are loaded with such negative connotative values during a long period of time will stand a minimum chance of being *washed* from them. The actual realized minimum where reappropriation may take place to an extent is among readers that already use the presented obscene words as reappropriated. Furthermore, the transfer from text to culture is realized only within small circles of people practicing polyamory (or any other form of sexual and romantic engagement perceived as non-normative) who want to find their place within the monogamous world by means of the emancipatory characteristic of reappropriation. This practice, however, inevitably remains in the periphery due to the usage within the circles and communities of people who aimed to reappropriate them in the first place, but it doesn't leave out the derogatory connotative value of them. Rather it provides a positive connotation strictly in the context of the particular groups' use, where every member is acquainted with the prevalent usage and uses the obscene words accordingly. Hence, reappropriation is quite unstable and short-term.

In the majority belonging to the centre, reappropriation will remain in the readers' mind as an idea, its subsequent development hindered and regulated by shame and fear, as well as their mere location within the proscribed normative everyday practice and language.

## 4. Proposed model of reappropriation of obscene language

The aim of this chapter is to present the functions of obscene language that we discussed and clarify whether they constitute a model of reappropriation; how successful is this model and why, as well as to assess the applicability of such a model.

The outlined functions of obscene language are as follows: enlightening function, performative function, function of normalization and imaginative function. The enlightening function contains three sub-functions explicated in the first chapter of the analysis: the correlational function, the descriptive function and the autobiographical function, all considered as dominant functions of the word *slut*.

The enlightening function, characterized by its tendency towards initiating novel thinking, provides an instance of creativity responsible for triggering a supplementary, third perspective in addition to the one of the reader and authors': the third comes to life in the reader's imagination, confirming its position as a tool capable of initiating change.

The performative function, entails repetitive action by means of language and that of materialization, i.e. physical manifestation of a specific belief, norm, attitude – in our case, the communicative and behavioral elements constituting sluthood.

The function of normalization is manifested with the usage of obscene words within a monogamous, central discourse consequently directing it more towards the center; the familiarity of the former makes the obscene words adapt into the existing norms and values, blocking the channel needed for reappropriation.

Finally, the imaginative function juxtaposes the real and imagined world creating space for the inception of an idea to take place in the reader's mind

These elements constitute our model of reappropriation of obscene language. However, whether this model can be observed as successful or not and why is an aspect to be discussed.

We can state that three functions – the enlightening, performative and imaginative one - carry an important role in the topic of our inquiry. Namely, their characteristics are constituted with elements of novelty, reiteration and creativity, all of which bring us closer to successful reappropriation. On the other hand, the function of normalization slows this



process down as a result of the position of obscene words in the central discourse within a bigger text fragment directed towards the real world.

Thus the text is a place of struggle between the real and imagined world, transferring to the reader's mind with one important addition raised at the end of the previous sub-chapter; the inception of an *idea* about reappropriation.

If we take into account Lotman's interest and application of organicist theories which is best visible on the example of the semiosphere for the purpose of depicting cultural dynamics, we may also provide a bit more attention regarding one's mind.

The model of the semiosphere can be applied to the activities taking place in the reader's mind; there are always dominant domains of knowledge and information acquired and continuously confirmed (center), i.e. *general norms* and *norms for oneself*, in opposed to subordinate, marginalized ones (periphery) – *general deviations* and *deviations for oneself*. We distinguish the two aforementioned types of norms and deviations – the general ones concern those acquired by means of general knowledge omnipresent in the culture's center. Those for oneself on the other hand are the ones developed on the micro-level; namely, as a consequence of various minor influences, primarily from the side of the family, a unit which carries a crucial role in the process of child rearing. Both the norms and deviations are in a state of mutual tension and occasional negotiations, results of which are manifested by peoples' perpetuation of their everyday selves which consequently maintains the existing social structure. In this sense, the reader's mind can be viewed as a text in making finding the way for its realization within a given culture.

It is precisely within the reader's mind where the inception of an *idea* first takes place, and in the case of the model of reappropriation of obscene language, the idea of reappropriation is a part of the three functions viewed as the most important ones; the enlightening, performative and imaginative one. This is due to the high level of creativity and novelty inherent to them. As we pointed out, the function of normalization slows down the process of reappropriation as a result of positioning the obscene words within the central monogamous discourse. These four outlined functions are the dominant functions exhibited by obscene words used in *The Ethical Slut*.

In addition, we presented three sub-functions of the word *slut*, being the dominant obscene word found in *The Ethical Slut* and the core around which the authors aim to build a polyamorous identity. The three sub-functions are part of the enlightening function and defined as follows: the correlational function, the descriptive function and the autobiographical function. The correlational function enables the author and reader to

establish a connection by means of identifying themselves with the word *slut*. The descriptive function consists of depictions of a slut's lifestyle, creating new fragments of cultural memory communicated through non-normative language, whereas the autobiographical function has the purpose of making the authorial voice more credible.

These three sub-functions initially left us with the perception of serving as a solid base for the process of reappropriation. However, this is not the case. We need to take into account the fact that the word *slut* was the most frequent one in *The Ethical Slut* and the choice of using it carries certain implications involving the overall agenda concerning reappropriation. As we briefly outlined in the section preceding the analysis and including an overview of the dominant obscene words present in the book, the word *slut* is applied fairly often for the purpose of subversive usage, primarily within the sphere of women rights and human rights overall. With this in mind, the selection of *slut* is not coincidental. If anything, it is presumably a better starting point for achieving reappropriation due to the emancipatory and subversive role it already has in certain social spheres. Nevertheless, this is also where one difficulty arises, namely the one which brings into the question the functions we would operate with if the word *slut* was substituted with that of *whore* or *tramp* which are used as subversive to the extent that *slut* is. When we draw the attention to the fact according to which the obscene words *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt* are present to a much lesser extent throughout the book than *slut*, this may result with the overall authors' agenda to be perceived as questionable. This is so because of their overall tendency to rely on the word *slut* which is easier to accept as containing a certain level of positive connotative value due to already present subversive characteristic it has. Moreover, the reliance on the word *slut* and the reduced presence of the obscene words *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt* in *The Ethical Slut*, indicated towards the debatable possibility of the process of reappropriation.

The enlightening, performative and imaginative function are elements necessary for achieving reappropriation because each of them contains crucial elements: that of novelty and creativity, embodiment of norms and the activation of the imagined world consequently leading to the inception of the idea of reappropriation. However, two aggravating circumstances are present which hinder the success of this model of reappropriation, making it only short-term as a result. The first one is the element of longevity of texts, while the second concerns the function of normalization which immerses the obscene words in the central, monogamous discourse making them adapt to the prevailing central values. The relevance of the factor of longevity is simple: both the negative and positive connotative values of a certain word are loaded continuously by means of its usage in a specific cultural

context. Due to the omnipresent taboo on sexuality in Western cultures throughout history, levels of obscenity have been altering but remained as such: obscene and in a certain way restricted in public.

Since according to Lotman, „the longevity of texts forms a hierarchy within the culture, one usually identified with the hierarchy of values“ (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 214-215), it takes an enduring process to revise and modify the long lasting embedded connotative values of a word and rearrange the existing hierarchy. For this to have a possibility of happening, two things need to be factored in: culture needs to allow for a reappraisal of its values to take place, and an accumulation and increased consummation of texts including the non-normative, peripheral discourse is needed in the course of time encompassing a few generations.

In addition to the factor of longevity of texts, the function of normalization shows that the actual lack of a polyamorous language leaves an option for the authors' to use the obscene words in the central, normative discourse where they consequently adapt.

Although the aim to reappropriate words such as *slut*, *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt* in *The Ethical Slut* is an important undertaking, the result of achieving this only short-term uncovers the challenge of its realization and the level of embeddedness of connotative values. We view the model of reappropriation as short-term because its accomplishment is seen only in fragments, i.e. through the enlightening, performative and imaginative function of obscene words. However, in order for a model to function, its parts need to be compatible and reciprocal, which is not the case due to the function of normalization. Moreover, the element of longevity of such texts would insure a much higher potential for the success of reappropriation in culture via text – culture transfer.

The existing model may be applied when analyzing similar types of texts containing obscene words in order to extract where the functions are predominantly present, which sub-functions arise and whether they execute an important role for the process of reappropriation. Furthermore, there is no need to remain strictly in the domain of obscene language, since fruitful material for studying linguistic reappropriation can be found in other areas such as those of political background.

## Conclusion

In this study we addressed the process of obscene language reappropriation in *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures* (2009). We did this by showing the functions of dominant obscene words in the book: *slut*, *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt*. We extracted four dominant functions of obscene language: the enlightening function, the performative function, the function of normalization and the imaginative function. Moreover, because the word *slut* was the most frequent obscene word in the book, three sub-functions we found as arising from it: the correlational function, the descriptive function and the autobiographical function. All of these functions further allowed us to propose a model of reappropriation of obscene language and discuss its applicability.

During the analysis it became clear that the actual establishment of a model of reappropriation in *The Ethical Slut* is a problematic undertaking. There are several reasons why this is so.

First of all, the authors' reliance on the word *slut* and the reduced presence of the words *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt*, indicated towards the smaller potential of reappropriation due to the already present positive connotative value the word *slut* contains. This already made it less obscene and brought into question the issue regarding what results would be found if instead of the word *slut* the word *whore* was used.

Second of all, the factor of longevity of texts was presented as an important element for establishing reappropriation. The development of the level of embeddedness of any word with certain connotative values is a continuous process in any cultural context. In the one where the taboo on sexuality is strong and prolonging to the linguistic level, it is laborious when attempting to modify these connotative values due to the existing hierarchy of values active within a given culture. To have a possibility of this modification to happen, culture needs to allow for a reappraisal of its values to take place, and an accumulation and increased consummation of texts including the non-normative, peripheral discourse is needed in the course of time encompassing a few generations.

Furthermore, the function of normalization has shown that the actual lack of a polyamorous language leaves the option for authors to use obscene words in the central, normative discourse. The immersion of these words within the central discourse leads them to adapt to the values of the center which consequently obstructs the process of reappropriation.

It is worth pondering whether the process of linguistic reappropriation is something fully achievable. In future research we may ask what are the potential elements that would benefit for the creation of more favourable circumstances for reappropriation to take place? It would be constructive to carry out a comparative study that would discuss the potential of reappropriation of obscene language on the basis of multiple genres. Possibly the differences and compatibilities found would uncover more layers of the process of reappropriation.

Finally, it seems that the development of a novel vocabulary used in particular groups would be an aspect relevant to attend to. It also may contain higher evolutionary potential as a result of the purity of novel notions.

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## Kokkuvõte

### Eetiline libu: obstsöönse keele taasomastamise kriitika

Antud töö teemaks on obstsöönse keele taasomastamise, „kultuuristamise“ võimalikkus eneseabi raamatu *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships & Other Adventures* näitel. Obstsöönset väljendid, mida analüüsitakse, on *slut*, *fuck*, *cock* and *cunt*. Et selgitada välja, mil moel ja kas kultuuristamise protsess antud materjali põhjal toimus ja luua analüüsist lähtuvalt taasomastamise mudel, kasutati töös tekstianalüüsi, mille fookuses oli kaks uurimisküsimust:

1. Mis funktsiooni täidab obstsöönne leksika uuritavas materjalis?
2. Missugused elemendid, vahendid on abiks obstsöönse keele taasomastamise mudeli loomisel?

Töö koosneb neljast peatükist. Esimene peatükk *Polüamooria, obstsöönsus ja obstsöönne keel* annab teoreetilise raamistiku arutlemaks polüamooria ja sellega seotud keelenähtuste üle. Samuti kirjeldatakse siin ülevaade uuritavat objekti, eneseabi raamatut. Tuuakse välja kasutatavad põhimõisted ja antakse nende historiograafiline ülevaade.

Teises peatükis *Metodoloogia ja taasomastamise mudeli konstrueerimine* on keskne teema Juri Lotmani semiosfääri mudeli kohandamine, samuti Lotmani pakutud eristus häbi ja hirmu vahel, mis mõlemad mängivad olulist rolli kultuuri reguleerivate mehhanismidena ja eriti obstsöönse leksika kasutamise vallas.

Kolmas peatükk *Eetiline libu* analüüsib objektteksti seal kasutatava obstsöönse leksika valguses. Analüüsi käigus toodi välja neli obstsöönse leksika domineerivat funktsiooni: valgustav funktsioon (*enlightening*) toetab loovust ja uuenduslikkust; performatiivne funktsioon, mis esitab norme läbi korduste ja füüsilise manifestatsiooni; normaliseeriv funktsioon takistab taasomastamist, sobitades obstsöönset sõnavara monogaamse keskme normide ja väärtustega; kujutluslik (*imaginative*) funktsioon kõrvutab reaalselt ja kujuteldavat,

imaginaarset maailma. Lisaks eristatakse sõna libu (*slut*) kolme allfunktsiooni: korrelatiivne (*correlational*) annab tõuke autori ja lugeja vahelise kontakti põhistamisele; kirjeldav (*descriptive*) sisestab kultuurimälusse, tänu kommunikatsioonile mittenormatiivse leksikaga, uusi fragmente ja autobiograafiline funktsioon muudab autori hääle veenvamaks ja usutatavamaks.

Neljas peatükk *Taasomastamise mudel* pakub välja mudeli ja arutleb selle kasutusvõimaluste üle.

Töös väljapakutud mudel, mille keskmes on eelpool välja toodud funktsioonid, on määratletud kui lühiaajaline (*short-term*). See tuleneb mitmest asjaolust. Privaatsfääris on lugemisprotsessi käigus valdavaks tundeks häbi, mis äratub üles Ise (*self*) ja temaga seotud olemasolevate normide ja uskumuste võrgustiku, millega Ise omakorda suhestub. Seetõttu võib defineerida häbi kui taasomastamise takistajat teksti omandamise tasandil, samal ajal kui hirm on takistajaks kultuuri tasandil. Normaliseeriv funktsioon näitas, et poliüamoorse keele faktiline puudumine võimaldab autoritel kasutada obstsöönset leksikat normatiivses diskursuses. Sellesse diskursusesse obstsöönse leksika sisestamine avab võimaluse kohandada kesksete väärtustega, mis takistavad taasomastamise, kultuuristamise protsessi.

Seal, kus seksuaalsed tabud on tugevad ja leiavad oma väljenduse ka keeletasandil, on raske taoliste seksuaalsusega seotud sõnade konnotatsioonide murda. On vajalik järkjärguline tabude, kivistunud hierarhiate, lõhkumine, millele aitab kaasa vastavate tekstide hulga suurenemine. Et need modifikatsioonid saaks võimalikuks, peab kultuur lubama oma väärtuste süsteemi ümbervaatamist, mis võimaldab uutel tekstidel kultuuri perifeeriast keskme poole liikuda.

Edasiseks uurimisküsimuseks võiks olla üldise kultuuristamise mudeli loomise võimalikkus. Samuti oleks huvitav vaadata, kas on olemas mingid üldised kultuuristamisprotsessi soodustavad asjaolud ja tingimused või on iga kord tegemist lihtsalt sõnastiku täiendamise ja uuendamisega.

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